

Kazuki Sakuraba
桜庭一樹

GOSICK

—ゴシック— 青い薔薇の下で

角川ビーンズ文庫

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「切らないで！
ヴィクトリカ、頼りにしてるー」

「弥は叫ぶ。」

「……しなくていい」

「君が友達思いの
優しい子だっけ信じてるよ」

ヴィクトリカは震える両手で重い受話器を握っていたが、
足もふらつき、腕もだるくなってきたので、
そのまま床に座りこんだ。

一弥は思わずショーウィンドウの一つに目が吸い寄せられた。
ガラスの靴のような小さなキラキラした
女性用の靴が片方だけ、飾ってあった。





久城 一弥

極東の島国よりソヴェール王国に留学してきた。心優しい優等生。聖物で正義感に溢れた、華一家の三男。

ヴィクトリカ・ド・ブロウ

書物・甘いお菓子・フリルを愛する、謎多き天才美少女。図書館最上階で膨大な書物を読むのが日課。



グレヴィール・ド・ブロウ

ヴィクトリカの異母兄で、地元警察署警部。色男だが、普段はなぜかドミルのような奇怪な髪型をしている。



アプリル・ブラッドリー

英国から学園に留学してきた怪談好きの美少女。冒険家サー・ブラッドリーの孫娘。



セシル先生

一途とヴィクトリカのクラス担任教師。大きな丸眼鏡が印象的な童顔の女性。

CHARACTERS

コルデリア・ギャロ

……謎の人物、ヴィクトリカの実母。

シニョレー

……警視総監。

ガルニエ

……デパート〈ジャンタン〉のオーナー。

ルイジ

……いつも〈ジャンタン〉の前にいる少年。

アナスタシア

……悪魔の賢となる少女。

ファイアン・ロスコ

……謎の人物、奇術師。

GOSICK

ゴシック

イラスト / 武田日向

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In another moment Alice was through the glass, and had jumped lightly down into the Looking-glass room.

—*Lewis Carroll*, *Through the Looking-Glass*

Prologue: Through the Looking Glass

Nighttime.

Stars twinkled in the dark canvas high above.

A palace built of glass and jet-black iron, a huge train station, and blackened brick buildings stood like structures in a detailed miniature city, gleaming under the moonlight.

In a corner of the city, a girl stood alone.

Her long sand-colored hair hung down her back, and her eyes, like jewels, shone a deep purple. An intense beam of light that seemed to cut through the night was pouring in front of her.

A slender mannequin, illuminated by the blinding light, was looking down at the girl from behind a thin glass partition.

The girl was wearing a worn-out, out-of-fashion dress and leather shoes with holes in them. Once fine pieces of clothing, they had long exceeded their useful life.

The mannequin was wearing a sparkling dress, a hat, and a bag embroidered with beads.

The girl let out a soft breath. *My... how lovely!*

The mannequin opened its mouth. "Lovely?"

Surprised, the girl looked at the mannequin's mouth. It was smiling. "Come," it said. "I'll let you wear them."

"But..."

"Just enter the fitting room and try them on inside. You don't have to pay anything."

"...Really?"

The mannequin smiled. "Really."

The girl entered the building. Surrounded by gorgeous products, she was handed a dress. She tottered onward. The door to the fitting room slowly opened. Clutching the dress, the girl ambled on, as though sleepwalking.

She entered the fitting room.

The door slowly closed behind her.

The girl continued walking.

Her sand-colored hair swayed.

A mirror inside the fitting room reflected the girl's shabby dress. The girl continued walking. The mirror rippled like water, engulfing the girl.

A salestaff in a purple uniform opened the door to the fitting room.

The inside was empty. There was only a dress.

The staff picked up the dress and smiled thinly.

Nighttime.

Outside the building, stars twinkled in the dark canvas high above.

Chapter 1: Magic Ring

Summer was fast approaching.

It was late in the afternoon, but the sun was still bright and intense. Horse-drawn wagons rolled along the village street, kicking up dust, and leaving behind the sweet smell of straw that heralded the coming of summer.

Kazuya Kujou, walking at a brisk pace along the village road back to St. Marguerite Academy, suddenly stopped when he noticed the smell. He turned around, squinting.

The big old wagon shook wildly from side to side as it moved farther and farther away on the bumpy road. With each rocking motion, little bundles of straw fell. On either side of the village road were rolling vineyards, their bright green vines swaying in the wind.

Kazuya Kujou resumed walking, this time with leisurely steps. He didn't have to walk so fast. There was still plenty of time before curfew, when the main gate of the academy would be closed.

He was a small, rather slim boy. His short black hair had grown a little longer and hung halfway over his jet-black eyes. Wearing a schoolcap on his head, he was dressed in the uniform of St. Marguerite Academy, a prestigious school with a vast campus at the foot of the mountains.

On his hand was a brown unsealed parcel.

Kazuya ambled along, running his eyes on a letter. His face gradually turned grim.

Dear Kazuya,

How are you? It's your sister! Get this. Father is so mean. And your brothers as well. How are they mean, you ask?

Kazuya leafed through the pages.

His sister's explanation covered about ten pages. He had reached the end of the village road and could see the main gate of the academy in the distance now.

Rattle. Rattle.

Kazuya jumped. Distracted by the letter, his cheek was almost grazed by a wagon that passed by.

The letter was from his two-year-older sister. She might seem like a fragile woman, akin to a delicate flower dancing in the wind, but deep inside she was bold and determined. She was quiet, but she could say what she wanted to say clearly, which sometimes led to fights with their stubborn father and older brothers. Kazuya often wondered if his father's rigid nature went to her instead of him.

His older sister was graduating from an all-girls' school this year and had decided to become a teacher at her current school instead of marrying a square-jawed, imperial soldier who was ten years older than her as their father had suggested. She had been arguing with her father and brothers about the matter day in and day out.

I wish you were here to take my side, Kazuya.

When he read those words on the eleventh page, he felt, from the bottom of his heart, that he was glad to be in Sauville right now. As the youngest, Kazuya was too soft to argue with his father and brothers, and his mother had always been quick to take the favorable side with a smile. She was a kind and graceful woman, his mother, but surprisingly, not at all reliable.

Kazuya was nearing the gate of St. Marguerite Academy. Its high iron fence, worked with an intricate, abaresque-like design, bore golden ornaments here and there.

Reading the letter, he passed through the gate and onto the campus grounds. Suddenly, he saw a list of unfamiliar words on the letter.

I want three blouses made of white cotton. With cute collars. And plaid ones. Leather shoes, dark brown, with accessories on the tips. Socks with embroidery and a glass pen. And ink, of course. And, uh...

His sister was asking him to buy some things she would need as a teacher from Sauville and send them to her. The shopping list went on and on.

Kazuya stopped, flabbergasted. He had no idea where or how to buy the items on her list, or what they even were. He heaved a sigh and looked up at the sky.

"Ah, there he is! He's the culprit!"

The word culprit made him turn around.

Whenever he came across an unusual incident or a crime wrapped in mystery, he would immediately pick it up—unconsciously, at this point—summarize it succinctly, run up a labyrinthine set of stairs, and bring it to his odd, but beautiful friend, who constantly complained about being bored and pestered him for mysteries.

The person shouting about a culprit turned out to be someone he knew—his homeroom teacher, Ms. Cecile. She wore big, round glasses and had shoulder-length brunette hair that fluffed up in the wind. She reminded him of a cute puppy.

For some reason, Ms. Cecile was pointing at him.

“The culprit? Where?” Kazuya looked behind him.

A breeze whistled past. There was no one there.

He turned back to Ms. Cecile. She was definitely pointing at his direction. Curiously, he studied the teacher and her finger.

The hedge beside her shook, as if a large beast was lurking in there. Kazuya took a step back.

A muscular old man with a bearded face emerged from the hedge. He was holding a pair of gardening shears in one hand.

“Mr. Gardener!” Cecile said. “That boy right there. He’s the culprit. He stepped on the violets and made a hole in the hedge.”

Kazuya’s breath seized. A few weeks ago, he needed to get out of the academy way past curfew, and he had done so through a hole in the hedge. When Ms. Cecile found out, she reprimanded him severely.

The gardener, his face tanned like leather, frowned at Kazuya. He must have been called to fix the hole in the hedge.

“So you’re the one who did this!” the gardener barked. “Do you have any idea how much effort I put into growing these things?! Come over here for a sec. I’ll cut off that mischievous arms of yours with this!” He swung his huge gardening shears around.

The man was threatening Kazuya so he wouldn’t escape. But Kazuya only turned pale as a ghost.

“I’m sorry!” Kazuya bowed his head.

Taken aback, the gardener regarded the back of Kazuya’s head with a puzzled expression. He chuckled. “Ah, it’s fine. You probably got an earful from Ms. Cecile anyway. Just don’t do it again.” He returned inside the hedge.

Ms. Cecile was chuckling.

Kazuya was about to walk away, when he remembered something and came back. ““Scuse me, Teach. I have a question.”

“What is it?”

Kazuya pointed to the letter in his hand. “What’s a Blue Rose?”

The year 1924.

The Kingdom of Sauville, a small nation in Europe.

Like a narrow, secret corridor, it stretched from the Gulf of Lyon, a summer resort for the aristocracy along the Mediterranean Sea, through inland Europe, and up toward the high Alps. Its border with Switzerland lay deep in the mountains, the border with Italy in the gorgeous region near the sea, and the border with France in an inland city where the royal palace was located. Surrounded by great powers, Sauville boasted a long and grand history, surviving even the Great War. It was called the little giant of Western Europe.

At the foot of the Alps was St. Marguerite Academy, a school with a long and grand history, though not as long as the kingdom itself. Known throughout the kingdom as the educational institution for the aristocracy, it stood grandly in a quiet environment. The majestic school building, shaped like a U when viewed from above, was surrounded by a vast garden and high hedges. Only students and staff were allowed entry to this secretive academy.

But after the end of the Great War, St. Marguerite Academy began accepting promising youth from allied nations as exchange students.

Fifteen-year-old Kazuya Kujou was a student with excellent grades and good conduct. He received a recommendation to attend St. Marguerite Academy partly because of his family background—his father, an Imperial soldier, and his two outstanding older brothers.

However, what awaited the thrilled Kazuya was the prejudice of the noble children, the language and cultural barriers, the mysterious horror stories that were rampant throughout the academy...

...and Victorique de Blois, a beautiful but strange and somewhat ruthless girl.

After a few months of studying abroad, Kazuya was finally getting used to life in Sauville, despite the difficulties he continued to face.

“Blue Rose?” Ms. Cecile inclined her head.

Kazuya nodded and sat down with his teacher on a wooden bench in a corner of the lawn.

The academy campus housed a huge U-shaped school building, a lavish dormitory for students, a grand library, and a chapel, and all around the paths connecting each facility were intricately-landscaped gardens that were a sight to behold. Fountains. Trimmed flowerbeds. Pleasant lawns.

Kazuya showed the letter he received from his sister. “My sisters wants me to buy her some things here in Sauville. Clothes, shoes, stationery.” At the end of the letter, it said, ‘and one Blue Rose. Thanks!’ Kazuya had no idea what she meant. “I thought a woman might know,” he added.

“You don’t know about it?” Ms. Cecile gave him a look of astonishment.

“I-I have no idea what it is. Is it supposed to be well-known?”

“Boys really *are* clueless about these things, huh?”

“Sorry...”

Because of Victorique and Avril, it had become a habit of his to apologize at the slightest of things. But he never really thought he was to blame.

“The Blue Rose is one of the largest blue diamonds in the world.”

“A diamond?”

“Yup. It’s about this big. It’s called the Blue Rose because it’s shaped like a rose. It’s the royal family’s national treasure and integrated into its emblem. Didn’t you see a picture of it in the textbooks?”

Kazuya nodded, remembering a picture of a blue diamond in his art textbook. But a moment later, he frowned. “Sending that to my sister will cause an international problem.”

Ms. Cecile laughed. “Oh, Kujou. Your sister is talking about a glass replica of the Blue Rose. It’s used as paperweight. They’re very popular among women right now. I believe they’re only sold at Jeantan.”

“Jeantan?”

“It’s a big department store in Saubreme.”

Kazuya’s brows furrowed.

Saubreme was the name of the capital of the Kingdom of Sauville. A city located on the plains near the border with France, it was far from the village where St. Marguerite Academy stood. He had passed through it once

when he first arrived in Sauville, but he had never been there since, because it was too far and he had no business there.

“I see. So I have to go to Saubreme to buy one.”

“Why not just tell your sister that it’s too far?”

“Hmm. I think she’s really looking forward to it, though,” he said, wearing a thoughtful look.

Staring at his face, Ms. Cecile reached her hand out and stroke Kazuya’s head.

“Wh-What are you doing?!”

“You’re such a good little brother!”



“Stop it!” Kazuya backed away. “Anyway, I was scared there for a second. I thought she meant a real blue diamond.”

“Actually, the real blue diamond is gone.”

“What? Gone?”

“It disappeared from the royal treasury during the Great War, along with countless works of art. I’m sure it’s been taken out of the kingdom and put on display in the mansion of some collector from the New World.” Ms. Cecile looked a little dejected.

“The Blue Rose has been a very important symbol of this kingdom. It’s been on the throne for generations. Apparently, the royal family suffered a great loss when it disappeared. There’s also a story about a past beautiful queen that involved the diamond. That’s why girls in this kingdom love it. It has a beautiful color and it’s shaped like a flower. Such a shame. I wonder where it is now.” She got up and turned to leave, but then remembered something. “Oh, Kujou!”

“Yes, Ma’am?”

“If you’re going to go to Jeantan to buy a Blue Rose...”

“I know. I need to apply for a permission to go out on the weekend, and I’ll make sure to be back before nighttime.”

“Can you buy one for me as well?”

“...What?”

“I’ve always wanted one,” she said happily. “But Saubreme’s too far.”

“I’m not an errand boy.”

“I’m counting on you. And don’t slack off in your studies.”

Ignoring Kazuya’s grumbling, Ms. Cecile walked away with a smile on her face.

“Ever since coming to Sauville, women have been playing me left and right. I gotta show them a man’s true worth one of these days.”

“Kujou, get one for me too!”

Kazuya screamed and jumped up from the bench. Trembling, he turned around and saw a familiar girl’s face behind.

Short blonde hair that dazzled in the sunlight. Bright blue eyes always sparkling with joy. Slender arms and legs. The perfect example of a blooming and energetic girl.

Avril Bradley, a foreign exchange student from England. She joined Kazuya’s class about three months ago, and they became friends after an

incident involving a purple book.

For some reason, she was creeping along the grass. Her skirt was slightly pulled up, revealing her long, radiant legs.

Kazuya blushed a little. “Wh-What are you doing?” he asked.

“Get one for me too, Kujou.”

“Get you what?”

“A Blue Rose paperweight.”

Kazuya sighed and sat back down on the bench. Avril peeked her head out from behind, wearing a big smile on her face.

“How long have you been there?” he asked.

“I was lazing around on the lawn over there. Summer’s close, and the weather’s nice and sunny.”

“Hmm...”

“Then you and Ms. Cecile came. I could sense the good vibes, so I thought I’d disturb you.”

“Good vibes how? First, the gardener threatened me with his gardening shears, and then Ms. Cecile asked me to do some shopping for her.”

Avril cackled. “You’re such a wimp.”

Her casual remark hurt Kazuya deeply. He looked the other way, pretending to be fine. He felt taps on his shoulder. He looked over, pouting, and Avril’s forefinger poked him on the cheek.

She laughed. “I got you! You fell for it!”

“What were you doing on the lawn?”

“Oh, yeah.” Avril pulled her finger away from Kazuya’s cheek and stood up. She scuttled to the other side of the lawn, her skirt fluttering, then came back clutching something to her chest. She was as quick on her feet as ever.

“Here!” She sat down next to Kazuya. “Ta-da!”

It was a book. It had many illustrations and large, easy-to-read characters. It looked like a book for children.

“I ordered it from the village bookstore,” she said proudly. “It finally arrived, and I’ve been reading it since last night. So I’m lacking some sleep. See these red eyes?” She pulled her lower eyelid.

Kazuya could find no hint of tiredness from the healthy-looking Avril.

He took the book. The title was straight to the point—Horror Stories. Kazuya tried to return it, but Avril put her hands behind her back.

“It’s an interesting book. You should read it too!”

“I’m not really a fan of this kind of stuff,” he said. “Besides, this is a children’s book.”

“It’s a pretty difficult book, you know.” Avril took the book from Kazuya and flipped through the pages, explaining the stories. “A noblewoman enters a fitting room in a department store. But when the clerk opens the door, all that’s left is a bloody head. Kyaaaaah!”

“I told you I’m not falling for that anymore.”

“Also, there’s a story about a beautifully-dressed little girl crying. People call out to her, thinking she’s lost, and then disappear. When they turn a corner, they’re gone, and only their clothes are left. A ghost in the form of a little girl takes them away to the underworld!”

Not paying any attention to Avril, Kazuya turned his eyes to his sister’s letter.

Hmm?

He’d been thinking that the mail was quite heavy. It turned out there was something else in it besides the letter. He glimpsed what looked like a light blue cloth.

“There’s also a murderer who dresses as a hobo. He hangs dead children’s bodies inside his old clothes. The hobo is actually an evil devil-worshiper from some colonial nation. Dried corpses sway inside his clothes as he walks! Hmm? What’s that?”

“Uhm, well. I found it in the parcel.”

Kazuya unfolded the light blue cloth from the mail with both hands. He breathed a sigh of admiration. Avril gasped as well.

It was a silk fabric. It looked somewhat familiar to Kazuya. A small, soft, light-blue kimono with thin, white lines depicting fresh water lilies floating in the water.

It was his sister’s old kimono that she treasured as a child. She used to wear it when going out.

A note fell onto Kazuya’s lap, and he picked it up.

“Compensation for the shopping trip. You mentioned making a friend. A small girl, you said. Please give this to her. From Your Sister.”

A small girl? Kazuya narrowed his eyes.

He had once written in a letter to his family that he had made a friend. A little girl. Apparently, his sister mistook her for an actual child. The kimono

was indeed breathtaking. Avril's breath even caught in her throat. But it was child-sized.

Victorique's the same age as me, though.

It occurred to Kazuya, then, that the kimono might be the perfect size for Victorique's smaller body. Although she had a big brain that even a bunch of adults could not match, her figure was as tiny as that of a child. If she removed all the layers of frills and laces wrapped around her, there wouldn't be a lot of her left.

Smiling, Kazuya immediately got up, intent on showing the kimono to Victorique.

"Kujou?" Avril called curiously.

She almost got up to follow him, but she was still sleepy. She rolled over on the bench and watched Kazuya as he walked away.

"You're probably headed there again," she mumbled. "I know all about it." She rubbed her blue eyes and slowly closed them. "You always end up in that place."

An early summer breeze blew past, flipping the pages of the children's book.

St. Marguerite's Grand Library.

At the back of the academy's spacious, gently-sloping campus, stood one of Europe's most prestigious halls of knowledge, with more than three hundred years of history behind it. The stone tower, shaped like a polygonal tube, its color faded by the elements, looked like a silent giant from its lofty perch, looking down on the entire campus.

The tower was of such a simple construction that one would wonder where the entrance was, but as you approached it, you would notice a leather door with brass rivets.

It was hollow inside, with a ceiling of dizzying height. Every wall was lined with bookshelves, filled with tens of thousands of thick, leather-bound books.

Solemn religious paintings covered the ceiling, but what really arrested attention was the wooden staircase, narrow and oddly-shaped.

A maze of stairs.

According to one theory, this place was a labyrinth that led to the heavens, built with precise calculations at the beginning of the 17th century

by the then King of Sauville. A henpecked husband, he built a small room at the top of the tower to keep his clandestine meetings with his young and beautiful mistress from being discovered. He also built a maze of stairs so that no one but themselves could ascend to the top.

Today, a hydraulic elevator, installed during a partial restoration, sat at the end of the hall. But only faculty and one special student were allowed to use it.

Victorique de Blois, the special student, was reading from the top of the library again today, her long, golden hair hanging down like Rapunzel.

The topmost room, which was once a bedroom where the king and his mistress indulged in each other's company, had now been completely remodeled and turned into a small, pleasant conservatory. Tropical trees and large, garish flowers glittered under the light streaming in through the skylight.

Between the conservatory and the landing of the stairs lay an extravagant porcelain doll of a young girl. Nearly life-size, it was about 140 centimeters tall, garbed in a satin aqua-blue dress overlaid with a bouquet of dainty laces. Her long, magnificent, golden hair, like an untied turban, cascaded down the floor. Her tiny feet were wrapped in boots embossed with rose patterns.

Her face, looking slightly downward, was impassive. Her bright, emerald eyes seemed to stare wistfully into some distant shore. A beautiful face wearing a ruthless expression.

The small, porcelain doll—no, the girl who looked like a doll herself—brought a ceramic pipe to her mouth and smoked it.

A wisp of white smoke drifted toward the skylight, rippled by the occasional gust of wind.

Victorique de Blois—St. Marguerite Academy's Princess Locked in a Tower.

For reasons unknown, she was not allowed to leave the academy, and perhaps as a way of protesting, she never attended any classes. She was a very beautiful and very mysterious creature who spent most of her time reading in this conservatory.

As always, several thick books were laid out in a circle in front of her. Smoking her pipe, Victorique read at a rapid pace.

It was like a scene straight out of a painting, seemingly unreal, as though she had been there for a hundred years. Whenever Victorique reached out to turn a page of the book, there was a faint rustling of her striking satin dress, the only sound in this otherwise silent sanctuary.

But soon, an intruder disrupted her beautiful, still image.

Noticing an approaching presence, Victorique lifted her head. It was a movement akin to a wild animal. A fish forewarning of an earthquake. A critter sniffing the scent of a predator. A migratory bird heralding the coming of winter.

Her brows slightly furrowed.

A loud bang came from far below, around the library hall. Someone had opened the door and entered.

There was silence, as though whoever was down there was listening closely if anyone was around.

“Victorique?” a small voice called. “Are you there?”

The voice belonged to a boy.

Victorique frowned a little. “Of course I’m here.”

Her voice sounded peculiar—husky, like that of an old woman. There was a sharp glint in her eyes somehow distant from reality, like an old-timer who had already lived several decades. The impression she gave was a stark contrast to her tiny, doll-like appearance.

The rhythmic sound of footsteps indicated that the boy—Kazuya Kujou—had started climbing up the stairs. Like a straight-laced, straight-A student, his footsteps were steady and constant.

Victorique listened to the sound of his footsteps as she smoked her pipe.

Suddenly, she heard a faint yelp, followed by the sound of something tumbling down the stairs. Startled, Victorique leaned over the railing and looked down.

She could not see Kazuya. He seemed to have tripped on the stairs and stopped short somewhere.

“Help! Victorique!” he cried. “Why am I even bothering? You’re never going to help. I know that all too well. Just wait there for me!”

Victorique shrugged and resumed reading as though nothing had happened.

Several minutes later.

Kazuya Kujou arrived at the conservatory, breathing hard.

Wiping the sweat from his forehead, he trotted happily, but tiredly, toward his little friend Victorique, who was reading a book.

"I tripped on my way up," he said, sitting down next to her in a familiar motion. "Since I always climb these stairs, I got distracted. Gotta stay alert at all times. I bet you'd die if you fall from somewhere high up."

Victorique snorted loudly.

For a while, Kazuya just stared at his friend's cold face with a grin.

"Oh, by the way," he said finally.

He got up and started collecting the candy wrappers that Victorique had left scattered on the floor. Victorique lifted her head for a moment and watched Kazuya, then turned her gaze back to her book.

"Did you receive a letter from your sister?" she asked.

Kazuya tucked the wrappers into his uniform's pocket. "I did. I went to the post office and got one. But it was a very long letter... Wait a sec. How'd you know?"

"The same as always. Through the Wellspring of Wisdom," Victorique replied wearily. She was about to flip through the book, when she pulled her hand back and balled both hands into fists. "Nothing is impossible to my Wellspring of Wisdom. Even if I am simply sitting here, I know everything. My heightened senses gather fragments of chaos from the world around me. The Wellspring of Wisdom then toys with them to stave off my boredom, reconstructing them, leaving only hard facts. The process brings me pleasure on the daily, and sometimes, if I feel like it, I may even verbalize them so that a simpleton like you can understand. It's often too much trouble, though."

Kazuya clicked his tongue in response.

"It's elementary. I can tell by the package you're carrying that you went to the post office. If it were a letter from your father or brothers, you would be miserable right now, but today you look happy. Thus one can assume that the letter is not from them."

"Well, when you put it like that, I guess it's simple."

Kazuya sighed and hugged his knees. He picked up one of the candies lying on the floor, peeled off the polka-dot wrapper, and tossed it into his mouth. The candy was bigger than he had expected. Chewing, he glanced at his little friends' face.

Victorique de Blois. A mysterious girl, who called Kazuya Kujou—a foreign student from an island country in the Orient, recognized as a brilliant student by academy staff—a simpleton.

Normally, Kazuya would never allow any other student to insult him. He had come to Sauville as a student representing his own country, and he had excellent grades to back it up.

But for some reason, when this little girl who had never attended class—yet somehow able to skim through difficult books with ease—said it, he couldn't refute her.

This was partly due to the fact that when he first met Victorique, she was able to get to the bottom of an incident in which he was involved. In all of their subsequent adventures, she was logical and articulate, and her Wellspring of Wisdom quickly reconstructed fragments of chaos and verbalized them.

And yet, Victorique had a helpless side to her. She had to exert all her strength just to lift even a small chair.

Kazuya found himself stunned by Victorique's mysterious mind, and deeply hurt by her insults, but rushed to her aid when she needed it.

Kazuya's pride, his common sense, and his hidden kindness had all been running at full tilt in the months since he had met her. Even now, he could not decide whether to get angry at Victorique for her blunt attitude, or stay around. He just stared at her cold little face, chewing on a big piece of candy.

"I think horror stories are just one huge collective illusion," Victorique said all of a sudden.

Kazuya, debating whether to crush or continue licking the candy, raised his head, surprised. "Wh-What?"

"I'm talking about the horror stories that are popular in this academy."

"Why?"

"Because I'm bored."

Kazuya frowned.

Victorique removed the pipe from her mouth and glared at Kazuya resentfully. Her emerald eyes glowed.

"Since you haven't brought me any mysteries from down the surface, I've been completely and utterly bored. I've been telling you constantly that

I'm bored to death, but you have not found a single mysterious case, and you don't have the heart to create one yourself."

"If I created one myself, I'd be the culprit. They'll put me on a ship and deport me immediately. You can be unreasonable sometimes, you know that?"

Victorique raised her head. "Princess's orders, Kujou. Get yourself involved in some incident by tomorrow."

"No way. Why would I do that?"

"Don't worry. I will solve the case once I feel like it."

"What happens if you *don't* feel like it?!" He turned his back on her.

Victorique scoffed. She moved to flip through the book, but yelped and pulled her hand back quickly. She clenched her hands into fists again and glanced at Kazuya, wondering if he saw anything.

She felt relieved when she saw he wasn't looking.

She stretched in the manner of cats. Her small body extended surprisingly long. Her blue satin dress and layers of black lace made a shuffling sound.

"So..?" Kazuya said.

"Hmm?"

"What was that about horror stories?"

"Oh, that." Victorique finished stretching and brought her pipe close to her mouth again. Puffing out smoke, she said, "Did you know that we are in the midst of an unprecedented horror story boom? Books compiling supernatural stories are selling like hotcakes, and tourists are flocking to mansions that are reputed to be haunted."

"I had no idea. There's one student in my class who loves horror stories. I'm not really interested, though."

"Have you noticed that this trend is centered in urban areas?"

Kazuya shook his head. "Not at all." Then he recalled the stories he heard from Avril earlier. They were all set in urban department stores, or city streets. He nodded to himself.

"This has been going on since the end of the last century. Rapid modernization is driving the darkness away. Mysterious phenomena that couldn't be explained by logic are being debunked by science. Mysteries cease to become mysteries. But people don't live only by what they can see

and understand. This is where the supernatural story boom comes in. It's simple desire."

"Desire?"

"Yes. The desire for the unseen and the incomprehensible to exist. Some look to religion, because they have not yet seen God. Some look to love, because they had not felt it. And some began looking to the supernatural."

"Religion and love is one thing, but the supernatural is just weird."

"What's weird is the souvenirs you sometimes bring."

"Ugh... right. Sorry about that."

He glanced at the candy container on the floor beside Victorique. Once a curious hat, it had been flipped upside down and turned into a candy jar. Even Kazuya himself had no idea what the fist-sized golden skull inside was used for.

Kazuya popped a second piece of candy in his mouth. "But I don't believe in supernatural tales. They're all just made-up. There's nothing in this world that can't be explained by logic. There are even countless theories about God, love, and so on. Anyway, I will never, *ever* believe in any kind of supernatural phenomena."

Victorique snorted. "People who say such things tend to have cold feet when something inexplicable happens."

"Th-That's not true..." Kazuya went silent.

Victorique looked up and regarded his face curiously. "Why the stupid look on your face?"

"Sue me, okay? I was born with this face."

"I see you're confident that you won't fall for any lies. Allow me to show you, then, that you are a fool, a rascal, and a brute." She sounded oddly cheerful. She faced Kazuya directly and stared at him, which was very unusual for her.

Kazuya shot her an uneasy look. Studying her from up front reminded him just how small she really was. It looked as though an intricate doll had been placed on the floor. The hand holding her pipe sometimes moved slowly like a puppet, but it was the enigmatic glint in her deep green eyes that proved that this was no doll, but a being with a will.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Take a gander."

"Hmm?" Kazuya leaned forward.

Victorique held out a clenched fist. It was surprisingly small. There was something shining on her right hand. A ring. A dull, olive-colored stone inlaid on a golden, serpent-shaped base.

“This is a magic ring,” she said.

Kazuya stared at Victorique with a puzzled look on his face.

She was serious. She didn’t seem to be joking, but she was certainly up to something. Her eyes were smiling.

“It’s a magic ring,” she repeated in a childish tone.

Kazuya scratched his head. “You can be so childish sometimes!”

“Shut up. How is this ring magic, you ask? It has the power to see through your lies.”

“Oh, just drop it already. There’s no way.”

“It can see through your lies. Scary, huh?”

“N-No, it’s not!”





“Then clean out those silly ears of yours and listen carefully. This ring glows red when you tell the truth. But it glows green when you lie. It’s a magic ring, after all. Do you understand? Nod even if you don’t.”

“...Okay.”

“Very well. I will now start asking questions.” She gave an affected nod.

She looked just like a child, her usual sagacious side nowhere to be found. Kazuya was confused, but he could not think of any way to escape from this situation, so he reluctantly decided to play along with her.

Right when I managed to escape from Avril and her ramblings about the supernatural... He sighed.

“Are you ready?” Victorique asked.

“...I am.”

“Kazuya Kujou is an idiot.”

“What was that?!”

“Give me your answer.”

“I’m not an idiot. I’m average,” he snapped. “No, wait. I’m a little smarter than average.”

“You’re lying.”

“Why, you...!”

Victorique’s smug look baffled him. He glanced at Victorique’s hand. The color of the ring had changed to a dark green.

Kazuya looked baffled. “You secretly switched the ring with a different one, didn’t you?”

“I did no such thing. If you’re in doubt, keep your eyes on the ring.”

“O-Okay...” He stared at the ring.

“Kujou is a womanizer.”

“...”

“A philanderer.”

“That’s too far.”

“He’s a bloodthirsty, lecherous, good-for-nothing.”

“Now you’re just being mean. More than usual...”

“Kujou.”

“Then answer is no! Listen here... Huh?”

Kazuya cocked his head. The ring had once again changed to a dark green. He watched it with bated breath.

Victorique cackled. “I told you. This is a magic ring.”

“Yeah, yeah. I’m just a bloodthirsty, good-for-nothing. Fine. You jerk.”

“Be quiet. One last question. Kujou, you are a boring simpleton.”

“Yeah, yeah. I get it. I’m a boring simpleton.”

With a big smile on her face, Victorique held up her hand toward him.

The ring had changed to an ominous dark red, the color of blood.

The dry wind of early summer that blew in through the skylight ruffled Kazuya’s forelocks. He was gaping at the red ring, his mouth hanging open. The tropical trees and the garish flowers stirred.

Victorique had turned her back on Kazuya and returned to her world of books. Kazuya waited for a while, but when she did not say anything, he reluctantly called to her.

“Then what?”

No answer.

“How does it work? You made such a big deal out of it, so there must be something. Come on, tell me.”

“...”

“Victorique. Can you tell me—”

Victorique raised her head and looked over her shoulder. “You’re still here?”

“Yes! I was waiting for your explanation.”

Victorique stared at him blankly, confused. “I’m reading a book. Could you please be quiet?”

“Victorique!” Kazuya suddenly shouted.

Victorique’s eyes widened in surprise. Her cheeks puffed. “Keep it down, Kujou.”

“I’m just curious.”

“But I’ve grown tired of poking fun at you.”

“You little... Why?!”

“Because you are a simpleton, I imagine.” She turned her back again.

“I’m warning you. I’ll get mad. Sometimes your insults are just too much. Some nights I wonder that maybe you actually hate me.”

Kazuya thought he saw a slight change in the expression on Victorique’s face. Was she perhaps concerned that she went too far? He couldn’t really see her face from where he was.

Victorique, however, pursed her lips tight. “Stop bothering me,” she snorted. “I’m reading a book.”

Kazuya went silent, miffed.

Another wind blew. The dazzling sunlight of early summer was pouring in through the skylight. Victorique's golden hair, hanging like an untied velvet turban, glistened.

A wisp of white pipe smoke rose toward the ceiling.

"Kujou," Victorique finally said without looking up. "Left bookshelf, seventeenth from the top, twentieth from the left."

"...What?"

"A book. Just bring it to me."

Irritated, Kazuya silently got up his feet. With rhythmic footsteps, he descended the narrow wooden stairs, grabbed the book Victorique asked for, and came back.

"Seventh line from the top of the seven hundredth page," Victorique said curtly.

"...Hmm?" Kazuya sat down beside her and began flipping through the thick book.

It was a book about rare gemstones. On the seventh line from the top of the 700th page, there was a description of a gemstone called an alexandrite.

"Ah..." Kazuya nodded.

Alexandrite was a gemstone that magically changed color to dark red when exposed to artificial light and to dark green when exposed to natural light. Since ancient times, fortune-tellers and the like had used its unique characteristic for magic. And there was a time when it was misused as a stone that held evil powers by colonials who spread their native religions, such as devil worship that swept Europe at the end of the last century.

Now that he thought about it, when the gem turned dark green, Victorique was holding it toward the sunlight streaming in through the skylight, and toward the bright lamps in the conservatory when it turned dark red.

"I see." Kazuya nodded. "The gemstone on your ring is an alexandrite."

"You thought it was magic, didn't you?"

"N-No way! I admit, I was a little, no, *very* freaked out. But..."

Victorique regarded Kazuya with a devilish grin on her face. "When I was young," she said, "I used this ring a lot to threaten Grevil."

"You mean Inspector Blois?"

“Yes. I was locked up in the tower, and for some odd reason Grevil came to see me every day and silently observed me, which I found quite creepy. I would use the ring to guess things that I had already learned from the Wellspring of Wisdom, and he would get so scared, tears would well up in his eyes.”

“Poor guy...”

Victorique frowned a little, and then leaned forward. “That’s not all. I had glowing messengers from hell run around the room. The fool thought I was a real demon. That’s how I managed to get rid of him.”

“Messengers from hell?”

“Glowing rats.”

“What are those?”

“Why do you care about every little detail?!”

Kazuya went quiet. Victorique didn’t seem to care.

In a weary tone, she added, “While you’re at it, open the same book to page one thousand two. It’s the fifth line from the bottom.”

“Hmm?”

Kazuya opened the book to the page she indicated.

There was an entry about a rare fluorite called a Blue John. It was a kind of crystallized mineral collected in limestone caves in England. Because of its blue-white phosphorescence, it had been used since ancient times for drinking cups and buildings. Apparently, since the last century mediums had been using it in their seances to make it seem like spirits were appearing.

“So you used this Blue John thing?” Kazuya asked.

Victorique nodded languidly. “Ahuh. I turned it into powder and put it on rats. Grevil was so terrified, he kept glaring at me.”

“But didn’t he get mad when you revealed the trick?”

“Reveal the trick?” Victorique asked curiously.

A wind blew once more. Bells from the campus chapel rang in the distance.

The sun was slowly setting, and the conservatory was filled with the humid evening air.

Victorique stared at Kazuya vacantly for a while, then in a surprised tone said, “I didn’t reveal anything.”

“What?! Why not?!”

“B-Because he ran away before I could say anything. And...” She pouted a little. “It was too much trouble.”

Kazuya didn’t know what to say.

Victorique was always ruthless and devious, yet also childish and weak. Kazuya would actually be furious at her sometimes for being incredibly mean. Still, the reason why he could not fully hate Victorique was because he had come to realize that she treated people other than him differently.

Victorique did not shower others with insults as much as she did to Kazuya. It had nothing to do with manners or friendship. She simply did not care.

Kazuya still remembered the words that Grevil de Blois said to him.

“You don’t realize it yourself, Kujou, but the privilege you enjoy is so odd, it’s like getting free money from an unscrupulous loan shark.”

Even now, Victorique hesitantly explained the magic ring to him, but if it had been anyone else, she would not have told them because it would have been too much trouble.

Taking all this into consideration, he couldn’t really fully hate Victorique.

Kazuya was about to get up and leave, when he remembered something. “Oh, by the way.”

Victorique was still clenching her fists and reading a book.

Not caring if Victorique was listening or not, Kazuya opened the parcel and showed it to her. There was a rustling sound as a light-blue silk kimono unrolled.

Victorique glanced at it. The light-blue kimono and the soft pink obi spread out on the floor like a blooming flower. She ignored it.

“My sister sent this,” Kazuya said. “I know my gifts are weird, but this one should be fine. I thought you might like it as a nightwear. Do you want it?”

There was no answer.

“Okay, then. If you don’t want it, I’ll just take it back with me,” he said, crestfallen.

“I want it!”

“Really? So you like it, then?” He beamed. “Man, why do you have to be so confusing? So anyway, you tie the obi like this, and this... Hey, look at me.”

Victorique turned her back to Kazuya and said, “With my Wellspring of Wisdom, nothing is impossible.”

“What now?”

“I don’t need you to teach me,” she snapped. “You just don’t know how to keep your mouth shut. We’re done here.”

“Now, listen here...”

Frowning, Kazuya untied the obi from his waist and set it on top of the kimono.

Victorique was still ignoring him.

Kazuya sighed. “See you later, then.”

When he received no reply, he hung his head and slowly descended the wooden stairs.

Smoking her pipe, Victorique listened to Kazuya’s rhythmic footsteps as they receded further and further away.

The footsteps eventually faded, and after a while there was a sound of the library door opening. After Kazuya had left and the library closed again, the air in the library stopped, leaving only profound silence, as there had been for hundreds of years.

The ceiling-high walls of bookshelves, the majestic religious paintings far above, the long, meandering stairs—everything in the tower was wrapped in stillness. The only thing that moved was the pipe held by the girl in a lavish dress, sitting alone in the conservatory.

She brought the pipe to her mouth and smoked a puff.

Now alone, Victorique’s face clouded with a tinge of loneliness. She opened the fist that she had kept clenched the whole time.

Her palms were small, like that of an elaborate doll. Her fingernails were as small as a child’s, her fingers surprisingly thin. Both of her palms were red and swollen.

A few weeks back, Victorique de Blois had snuck out of St. Marguerite Academy and had gone to a secluded village deep in the mountains. Kazuya, finding out about her trip, tagged along and actually helped her a great deal. But she almost lost him in the process. Desperately, she saved him with her tiny hands. She could not lift heavy things, and she had not once exerted so much strength before that.

The skin on Victorique’s palms was so fragile that even now they were red and swollen to the point of being painful to the touch.

Of course, Kazuya had no way of knowing about the injured palms she kept hidden.

For a while, Victorique stared at her swollen palms as if she were looking at something bizarre. She looked puzzled, as though she couldn't understand what had happened to her hands.

Eventually, she lowered her palms to her knees with a frown.

She turned to the beautiful kimono on the floor.

Although she had to control herself when Kazuya was present, Victorique was actually completely captivated by the refreshing light-blue color of the oriental garment. She had never seen such a design before. The negative emotions—weariness, boredom, sadness, anger—that had filled her heart until moments ago had vanished. Cautiously, she reached for the curious garment.

The silk was much rougher to the touch than the Western-style dresses Victorique was accustomed to wearing. The water lilies, which looked like they had been quickly painted with a white brush, were flowers she had never seen before. Victorique gently reached for the obi. The fluffy pink cloth was stiff and surprisingly hard. Caressing the beautiful kimono and obi, Victorique let out a faint gasp.

“Ah, how pretty!” she breathed.

With a smile of innocence and happiness that she had never shown to anyone, Victorique repeatedly rubbed her cheeks against the kimono.



The sun was slowly sinking below the horizon.

The red light of the setting sun shone all over the spacious campus of St. Marguerite Academy. Dusk was creeping in on the fountain, on the bridge over a stream, the high hedges.

The riveted library door opened quietly, and Victorique stepped out. With both hands in front of her chest, she walked carefully and slowly, carrying her kimono and obi.

She walked on for a while. She passed by the fountain, crossed a small bridge, and ambled along a white gravel path.

In one corner of the campus, opposite from the library, was a labyrinth of hedges. Large flower beds, about the height of a person, built in the form of a maze. A curious kind of garden loved by the nobility in the Middle Ages.

Gold, light purple, and crimson flowers were blooming in every corner of the square-cut flowerbeds.

Victorique entered the maze in a familiar manner, and like a young ghost sucked into the evening darkness, she completely disappeared from sight.

She walked straight through the flowers that lined both sides of her familiar path, navigating through the maze without trouble. Anyone else would've been lost if it were their first time.

She made it through the maze and onto a clearing. A modest front yard. A cozy two-story house, too small for humans. Outside, an iron spiral staircase connected the first and second floors.

Victorique strode swiftly into the small, colorful, candy-like house.

The inside was like a dollhouse. It was lavish, but each piece of furniture was small, as if custom-made, and looked more like colorful toys. In the bedroom was a lovely canopied bed and a mirror stand made of brass. A tiny rocking chair for children sat by the window of the small living room. On a chest of drawers was a pretty plate with a strawberry motif and a picture embroidered with beads.

Thick books were piled high from the floor to the ceiling.

Victorique entered the room with a yawn, but when she carefully placed the kimono and obi on the miniature table, she smiled broadly, caressing the cloth over and over again with her tiny hands.

"Kimono, kimono! Kujou gave me a kimono!" she hummed in her low, husky voice.

She twirled around, and almost fell, but managed to return to her original spot. She gleefully rubbed the kimono again.

She opened the door of a large wardrobe and was about to hang the kimono when she stopped.

“That rascal said to use it as a nightwear,” Victorique mumbled.

She then began taking off her own lavish dress of aqua-blue satin and black lace.

She untied the layers of thin ribbons around her chest, one at a time, from top to bottom.

Still untying...

A little more to go...

Once she was done with the ribbons, she undid the buttons underneath, one by one.

Still undoing them...

A little more to go...

When that was done, she moved to the ribbon and the buttons on her sleeves.

When she finally finished removing all the ribbons and buttons, she took a deep breath, and took off her dress. She removed the pannier—an undergarment like an open umbrella with laces that was attached to the waist to make the skirt of the dress wider—with both arms, sat down on the floor, and took off her rose-stamped boots one foot at a time. She also removed her silk, embroidered socks and put on her soft, ballet slippers.

“Phew...” Victorique stood up.

Without her heels, she looked even much smaller than before. Although her laced camisole, her three-tiered frilled petticoat, and her embroidered drawers gave her more volume, she was still much smaller than when she was wearing the dress.

Stretching as high as she could, she managed to put the blue satin dress back in the wardrobe.

She turned to the kimono spread out on the table. Her face was as cool and expressionless as usual. But there was a hint of joy in her eyes.

Slowly, she reached for the kimono and wore it.

First, the right sleeve.

Then the left.

The kimono slowly wrapped around her small body.

The corners of her mouth loosened.

But as she grabbed the obi, she frowned. “A belt?” she wondered. “There’s no buckle. A ribbon, then? It’s awfully long for a ribbon.”

For a while, she fiddled with the belt like a cat playing with catnip.

“I sense chaos,” she murmured.

Too bothered to figure it out, Victorique began twirling the sash around her fragile, thin waist. She tied it in a ribbon and nodded.

Having grown weary of thinking, she yawned loudly and sat down on the rocking chair. Swaying back and forth, she picked up a nearby book and began flipping through its pages. She lit up a pipe and smoked a puff. She immersed herself in the world of books, leafing through pages endlessly.

Night had fallen. The moon was shining all over the vast campus of St. Marguerite Academy.

The U-shaped school building was empty, and silence reigned in the student dormitory. Apart from the footsteps of the dormitory head on patrol and the faint light from the lamp on their hand, nothing could be seen, and nothing moved.

In the quiet darkness of the campus, a figure walked slowly. She was petite, with shoulder-length dark-brown hair and large round glasses that always seemed a little crooked. Ms. Cecile.

The lamp in her hand glowed orange. Wearing a thin coat over her light-gray nightgown and a round light-gray hat, she ambled along the gravel road.

When she reached the flowerbed maze, she sighed and ventured in. She, too, vanished like a ghost.

“I’m sure she’s around, but considering what happened, I have to make my nightly rounds to make sure Victorique is staying put,” she muttered. “There would be trouble if she and Kujou went off somewhere again.”

With familiar steps, she made it through the maze. She crossed the modest front yard and entered the dollhouse.

The lights were out. Ms. Cecile slowly entered the dark bedroom and directed the light of her lamp toward the canopied bed.

A large frilly pillow. On top of it was Victorique’s little face.

Her long golden hair lay spread out on the sheets. Victorique was asleep, her small hands clasped around her head like a child.

“Nothing unusual here,” Ms. Cecile said, relieved.

Then noticing something off, she held up the light over the bed.

Victorique was wearing an unfamiliar nightgown. It was light-blue and oddly-shaped, tied with what looked like a large, pink ribbon that had almost completely unraveled.

Ms. Cecile tilted her head in thought. It was very unusual for Victorique to do something different. She always went to the library at the same time, came back at the same time, and wore the same nightwear.

Once again, Ms. Cecile shined the lamp on the bed.

“Oh...?”

The oriental nightgown was quite revealing, perhaps due to Victorique’s sleeping position as well. Her little navel peered out from the top of her pretty embroidered undergarment.

The lamplight shone dimly on her pure white belly.

Ms. Cecile giggled. “You’re going to catch a cold like this.”

She set the lamp down and fixed Victorique’s nightclothes.

With a chuckle, Ms. Cecile left the bedroom.

Victorique groaned and turned in her sleep.

The nightwear that Ms. Cecile had fixed for her had loosened again. She was breathing softly like an adorable little critter.

The night wore on...

Around the same time, Kazuya was at his desk in the boys’ dormitory.

Thick Gobelin curtains hung over the French windows. A mahogany desk stood by the window, with textbooks and dictionaries arranged neatly on top of it. The wall-mounted gas lamp flickered silently.

Kazuya opened the letter from her sister and read it over and over again.

“A Blue Rose paperweight, white cotton blouse. What else, uhh...

What’s a tartan collar again? Shoes, socks, pen and ink...”

Kazuya set the letter down and heaved a deep sigh.

Then, pulling himself together, he put a map of Sauville that he had brought with him when he left the country, an itinerary, and a brochure with information on department stores on the table.

He opened the brochure. “Hmm... First the station, which is here. And the department store Jeantan is over here. It’s within walking distance. Where else do I have to go?”

Troubled, he pulled out another document and pondered things over. Even as the night deepened, Kazuya continued to plan his trip, taking serious notes.

“Achoo!”

As it always did, the dark, silent night gave way to dawn, and a bright morning greeted the quiet grounds of St. Marguerite Academy.

As the morning sun lit up the gardens, Kazuya, who woke up earlier than usual, went down to the dormitory dining hall. He greeted the red-haired dorm mother, asked for breakfast, and ate quickly.

He then got up, thanked the lady, and left the dormitory. In his hand was a bag containing a notebook in which he had jotted down his shopping plans.

As Kazuya started walking straight toward the main gate, he heard light footsteps coming from a distance. He wondered who it could be. It was the weekend and still early in the morning. Curious, Kazuya turned around, and the person also stopped and stared at him in surprise.

She was squinting, dazzled perhaps by the morning sun. It was Ms. Cecile.

“Good morning,” Kazuya greeted.

“Ah, Kujou...” Ms. Cecile looked oddly flustered. She tottered up to Kazuya.

“What’s wrong?” Kazuya asked.

“A cold,” she replied.

“Really? You look fine to me.”

“N-Not me.” Ms. Cecile flapped her plump arms up and down. She was clearly rattled. “It’s Victorique. Victorique caught a cold.”

“She did?” Kazuya was stunned. Ms. Cecile was staring back at Kazuya with a look of disbelief.

It was hard to believe that the quiet Victorique, who was always at the conservatory, would catch a cold. Kazuya couldn’t wrap his head around it.

Ms. Cecile cocked her head. “She was wearing a different nightwear last night,” she said. “This big, hard ribbon had come undone, and her belly button was showing, so I fixed it for her. But this morning, she was wobbly with a severe cold.”

Kazuya’s breath caught. He had a good idea what she was talking about.

Ms. Cecile noticed his outdoor jacket and bag. “Oh, you’re going shopping in Saubreme, right? You asked for a permit. Sorry for keeping you. See you around, then.”

“The nightwear you were talking about.” Kazuya quickly stopped Ms. Cecile before she could walk away. “I think it’s the one I gave her. The way to tie the obi is complicated. I’m sure she couldn’t do it properly. I’ll write down how to tie it.”

“Oh!” Ms. Cecile had a terrifying look on her face. Kazuya backed away. “Silly Kujou. If you give someone something unique, you have to teach them how to wear it properly.”

“Well, I tried to teach her.”

“No excuses. Now say you’re sorry.”

“...”

Kazuya stared at Ms. Cecile for a moment, but after only a few seconds, he lost the staring contest and hung his head. “I’m sorry.”

“Write a letter to Victorique, then,” the teacher said with a smile.

Kazuya ran back to his dorm room. He pulled out his writing pad and pen and sat down at his mahogany desk. He wrote down an explanation on how to tie the obi, complete with illustrations. He was about to fold it when a flash of inspiration struck him. He opened a drawer and found a colored pen that he had not used for a while. He then colored the illustrations, light blue for the kimono and pink for the obi, turning it into a beautiful letter that Victorique would be pleased with.

Victorique herself told him that she liked beautiful things. If he made sure the letter looked pretty, he was sure she would like it.

Kazuya folded the letter and put it in the Japanese paper envelope that he had brought from his country. He also put a small golden flower he found from the flowerbed a short distance away from the dorm in the envelope.

“All good.” He nodded with confidence.

He headed to the place where Ms. Cecile said Victorique’s special residence was located. It was hard to imagine Victorique being anywhere else but the library. When Kazuya finally found the place, he studied the labyrinth of huge flowerbeds with a dumbfounded look.

“What’s this?”

He stayed there for a while, then without much of a choice, stepped inside.

After a few steps, he turned back. Not only would he get lost inside, he might even forget where the entrance was.

As he stared at the flowerbeds in wonder, Ms. Cecile arrived. Seeing Kazuya having trouble, she took the envelope from him and said she would bring the letter to Victorique herself. With familiar steps, she disappeared into the labyrinth.

Watching her made Kazuya feel strange, some mixture of sadness and frustration. Unsure what it was, Kazuya frowned and waited for Ms. Cecile to come back out.

“Achoo! Achoo! Achoo!”

Victorique’s head rocked back and forth as she sneezed.

When she woke up, she wondered why the ceiling was spinning, why her face was hot, and why her body felt sluggish. For the first time in her life, Victorique had caught a cold.

She was small and weak, and her body was in no way robust. Since she was a child, she had been leading a methodical and ascetic life, either in her room on top of a tower or in her special residence at St. Marguerite Academy, without going anywhere else.

“Achoo!”

Her long, golden hair bounced up and fell back onto the silk sheets. Victorique was silent for a bit, wearing a pitiful look.

Then slowly, she reached for a tissue paper, and blew her nose.

Tears welled up in the corners of her eyes. She had blown too hard, it seemed. She held her nose with both hands, her shoulders shaking in pain, and stayed still.

The door opened quietly to admit Ms. Cecile.

Victorique turned to the door. “Oh, Cecile.”

Her voice was more raspy and strained than usual. Her cheeks, which had turned crimson, were plumper and seemed a little swollen.

Ms. Cecile entered and placed a pitcher of water, a packet of medicine, and a small glass of milk on the bedside table.

“Oh, I saw Kujou, by the way,” she said.

“Hmm?”

“When I told him you caught a cold, he was so worried. He really likes you, doesn’t he?” She chuckled, then remembered something. “Here’s a letter.”

“A letter?”

“I saw him standing around in front of the flower beds, so I took it. He seems to be in a hurry, so write him back a reply right away.”

“Why is he in a hurry? Achoo!” Head jerking as she sneezed, Victorique regarded Ms. Cecile curiously.

The teacher smiled. “He’s going shopping in Saubreme. His family asked him to. He looked a little excited.”

“Kujou? Excited? The nerve... Achoo!”

Ms. Cecile left the bedroom to tidy up.

Victorique studied the Japanese envelope with some glee. The envelope had a similar rough texture to the kimono she had rubbed her cheeks on last night. After enjoying the feel of the envelope for a bit, Victorique opened it happily. She became even happier as a golden flower spilled out.

With a smile on her red face, Victorique opened the envelope. She was impressed by the beautifully-colored kimono and obi, but then her emerald eyes flashed with anger at the first line of the letter.

It read: **“Victorique, are you all right? Teach told me you were sleeping with your stomach out like an idiot. Man, you’re such a dummy. So, this is how you tie the obi...”**

Victorique crumpled the letter in her tiny hands.

“Achoo!”

She used the letter to blow the snot off her nose. Then she rolled her small, pearly arms around and threw the crumpled piece of paper against the wall.

“Victorique,” Ms. Cecile called from the next room. “Don’t forget to write a reply for Kujou. He was very worried about you.”

Victorique’s green eyes narrowed in rage.

Kazuya, who had been waiting anxiously, immediately called to Ms. Cecile when she came trotting out of the flower beds.

“How is she feeling?” he asked.

“She can’t stop sneezing. And her face is red.”

Ms. Cecile produced a folded paper from her pocket. It was a pretty piece of stationery paper with a faint image of roses in a birdcage. It smelled sweet, as if it had been soaked in flower-scented perfume.

It was the first time he had received a letter from Victorique. Kazuya waited patiently for Ms. Cecile to leave. Once he was alone, he quickly opened the letter.

It contained one word, written in huge letters.

“Idiot.”

Kazuya’s head dropped.

He felt like an idiot for feeling excited. For a while, he just stood there with his head low, but when he realized that the train was arriving, he turned to leave.

After a few steps, he turned to the direction of Victorique’s special residence, supposedly located on the other side of the overgrown flowers.

“You’re the idiot!” he shouted. There was no reply. He grew more and more pissed. “I got no souvenirs to give to a meanie! You hear me?!”

Kazuya’s loud voice echoed hopelessly.

He thought he heard a faint sneeze coming from inside, but there was only cruel silence afterwards.

Looking over his shoulder several times, Kazuya walked away.

Bedroom 1

The warm morning sun shone through the closed French windows of the bedroom. The bobbin lace curtains were half open, bringing light into the small room.

“Achoo!”

Victorique was sleeping face down on a canopied bed. Her face was pressed against a large, frilled pillow, and her little head rocked with each occasional sneeze.

Her long, golden hair spread loosely on the silk sheets. It shifted a little every time she sneezed.

Victorique slowly lifted her head.

Her cheeks were red, and her emerald eyes, usually ruthless, were moist as wet jewels.

“Achoo! Achoo! Achoo!”

After sneezing in succession, her head plopped back down on the pillow. A flicker of what seemed like anger crossed her face.

Her little lips, red like ripe cherries, parted. “Kujou’s gone out, huh?” she mumbled.

The bedroom was quiet once more.

Victorique’s moist eyes again flashed with anger.

“The nerve of him... Going out all excited...”

She rolled over on her back and stared blankly at the mosaic glass lamp hanging from the ceiling. The heat blurred her vision, and she blinked repeatedly.

Unable to take the heat, she closed her eyes. “He went out alone...”

Sulking, she pulled the feather comforter and slipped deeper into the bed, her tiny body disappearing under the covers. The luxurious but tiny bedroom appeared to be empty now.

“Achoo!” The comforter shook. “Achoo! Achooooo!”

After a series of sneezes, silence came.

Then, an odd sound came from under the sheets. She was either crying, or her nose itched.

Outside the window, a small bird perched on the flower bed chirped.

Chapter 2: The Blue Rose

The whistle blew.

With his bag in hand, Kazuya scurried into the small station, the only one in the village, and hurried down the platform, which shook to the roar of the train that had arrived. It being the weekend, the train was packed with people traveling from the boondocks to the city. Villagers dressed in fashionable clothes raced to be the first on the train. Kazuya got in line and boarded through the big iron door.

He walked down a narrow corridor and peered into the small glass windows of each compartment, but there were already three or four people sitting. Some were flipping through books, some were opening lunch boxes filled with roasted chicken and bread, and some were simply making themselves at home. Every section was crowded, so Kazuya changed his mind about finding a seat. And if he, a rare oriental boy, joined a lady with a child, he would be asked about his name, age, the school he was going to, among others. He had already experienced this on the first train ride to St. Marguerite Academy after arriving in Sauville.

When Kazuya found a compartment with only one young man, who was looking out of the window with his chin in his hand, he decided to enter.

He gently opened the metal door. "May I?" he asked.

Looking out the window, the man said coolly, "Feel free."

Kazuya closed the door and took a seat across from the man. He looked like a noble, dressed in a very expensive-looking silk shirt, silver cuffs, and shiny boots. He looked more fashionable than some women. He was looking out the window in a grandiose pose, his legs crossed and his chin resting in his hand.

The man sighed and turned his face to Kazuya.

Kazuya gasped and half-rose to his feet.

On the man's head was a shiny and pointy, golden drill-shaped hair. It was Inspector Grevil de Blois.

When the inspector realized that it was Kazuya who entered the compartment, at first his mouth dropped open in surprise, then he frowned deeply.

“Tch. It’s just you.”

“That’s *my* line! I think I’ll just find a different compartment.”

“Everywhere else is full.”

“Right...”

Kazuya reluctantly sat back down.

Both he and the inspector seemed disheartened.

After a few moments of silence, the inspector expressed what they both felt.

“To think we would run into each other here. How laughable.”

“You can say that again.”

They remained silent for a while, looking out the window, checking their shopping list. After about thirty minutes, boredom struck.

“How about a chat, Kujou?” the inspector said.

“A chat? Us?”

“There’s no one else here, unfortunately.”

When Kazuya reluctantly nodded, the inspector turned to him with a serious face.

The question was: what would they chat about? At first, they talked about world affairs and the recent Great War, but the inspector, who belonged to the aristocracy of Sauville, a powerful nation in Western Europe, and Kazuya, a bright young man from an island county in the Far East, had very different ways of thinking about everything. When Kazuya was about to win an argument, Inspector Blois quickly changed the subject.

“By the way, Kujou.”

“What is it?” Kazuya scoffed. It had been a while since he beat someone in an argument, so he was all fired up.

“Speaking of the Great War, do you know why I’m on my way to Saubreme right now?”

“How should I know? I’m not Victorique. I don’t know unless you tell me.” He snorted. “I’m just a simpleton, after all.” The sudden change in subject left him a little bemused.

“What are you getting all worked up about?” Inspector looked dumbfounded. “Anyway, I’m going to Saubreme because I’ve been

summoned by the Sauville police department. The current police commissioner, Mr. Signore, had climbed the ranks at a young age, but he's awfully dull. They are counting on me, a famed inspector, to solve a case that's giving them a headache."

"Are you sure you're okay on your own?" Kazuya asked.

Inspector Blois ignored his snide remark. "What do you think Sauville lost during the Great War?"

"Lost? Well, we won the war, so I guess young soldiers' lives, historic buildings, and..."

"A royal treasure." The inspector clicked his tongue bitterly. "Sauville's royal treasury was ransacked during the height of the war. Countless works of art of historical value disappeared. It was long thought that they had since been bought by some nouveau riche from the New World, but it seems they have been in this kingdom all along."

Kazuya thought he had heard the same story recently from someone.

"Said artworks have been appearing on Sauville's black market over the last few years. And that's not all. Treasures of the Romanov family, which were supposedly brought to Europe just before the Russian Revolution in 1917 and then vanished, and treasures of ancient civilizations from the colonies have been appearing on the European black market. What's more, the black market is apparently located in Saubreme. There have been reports recently of Western European collectors visiting Sauville secretly. But they're elusive. That's why headquarters called me, a man with a brilliant mind, for help. How's that?"

"How's what?"

"Isn't it great?"

"Uh, I guess." Kazuya nodded.

The inspector shook his head with a sigh, then began carefully fixing his pointy, drill-shaped hair. He watched Kazuya, looking bored. He then pulled a pocket watch from his pocket and opened it.

"Still an hour to go," he said gravely.

"Yeah..."

"Your turn, Kujou. Share something interesting."

"No way!" Kazuya turned away. He shifted his attention to the scenery outside the window.

The train had left the lush greenery of the mountains and was gradually approaching the city. There were less greens now and more flatlands. Cars and horse-drawn carriages rolled past rows of houses.

Shopping alone is kinda lonely, Kazuya thought.

Then he remembered the time he went out on a trip with his little friend Victorique.

Strangely enough, the irritation he felt earlier when he read Victorique's reply had vanished. He recalled the first time he went out with Victorique and her bizarre behavior back then.

She didn't know how to buy a ticket, didn't know how much money she needed, and kept wandering left and right. While on the train, she looked out the window in wonder, and when they arrived at the city station, she would point at all sorts of things and ask him what they were. She was shocked when he whistled to hail a carriage.

At that time, Kazuya did not know anything about Victorique's situation, so he asked her if she didn't go out much. Immediately after, Victorique's mood turned sour and she fell silent. But he found her pouty face adorable too.

The second time they went out, Victorique was in an awful mood from the beginning, ignoring Kazuya on the way. But in the end, Victorique told him that they would go back together.

That was enough for Kazuya. He would get mad at her mean and sharp tongue, but a single word from her would magically make his anger go away.

Sensing a gaze, Kazuya raised his head and found Inspector Blois staring at him.

"Why are you the one who's here with me?" Kazuya mumbled.

"That's *my* line."

Sad thoughts seemed to be running through the inspector's head; his eyes, the same green as his half-sister's, were slightly moist.

He shot Kazuya a resentful glare. "Your presence really pisses me off," he said.

"The feeling's mutual."

"You look so dull."

"Right back at you."

Carrying two grumpy men, the train rattled along.

An hour later, the train finally arrived at its destination—Saubreme station.

Named Charles de Gilet Station after the then King of Sauville who built it in the middle of the previous century, the station in Saubreme was an extravagant and gigantic structure that showed how powerful this small kingdom was.

Ceilings fitted with glass. Magnificent pillars made of black bricks. Light from the bright, early-summer sun fell onto the whole station. A large round clock sat above the steel overpass connecting the platforms.

People looked as small as peas, constantly streaming across. When a train arrived, countless passengers disembarked and crossed the platform all at once. Porters in red uniforms carried passengers' travel bags. A feathered bonnet on the head of a female passenger wobbled. A noble gentleman passed by, his expensive-looking walking stick that resembled an animal head clicking on the floor. A child tottered along, pulled by their mother.

A huge structure made of thick, sturdy glass and black iron. Luxurious and practical at the same time. An architectural style that had gained prominence in modern times. It seemed to symbolize the current state of Saubreme, a city that grew along a river. Home to the prestigious royal family, Saubreme was one of the top economic hubs in Europe, and a rapidly-developing industrial city, where the smell of iron and coal permeated the air.

“Jacqueline!” Inspector Blois shouted out of nowhere.

Kazuya jumped. When he turned around, he saw the inspector calling a young woman passing by on the platform. She was wearing a fine and stylish dress, the kind that would normally be worn by a more senior woman. Her straight brown hair, which lacked a bit of luster, was tied up in a simple bun.

The woman turned around and backed away, startled by the inspector's hairdo.

When he got a good look on her face, Inspector Blois looked disappointed. “Sorry, I got the wrong person.”

The woman smiled and walked away.

“Who's Jacqueline?” Kazuya asked.



The inspector pretended not to hear. He walked on, up the steel overpass and toward the big ticket gate. Walking in the same direction as him, Kazuya inclined his head, wondering what that was all about.

The inspector looked somewhat dejected. His pointy, drill-shaped hair was a little wilted.

As they exited Charles de Gilet Station, glaring sunlight shone on their faces, obscuring the city of Sauville for a moment. When their eyes finally adjusted, there was a huge intersection in front of the station, with horse-drawn carriages and shiny automobiles speeding around the bends without slowing down.

Windows lined both sides of the wide sidewalks. Gentlemen with their walking sticks and gorgeous ladies with parasols in their hands walked in and out of stores. The area in front of the station was packed with streets, stores, and tall buildings.

Kazuya's eyes were drawn to one of the windows. It was a pipe shop, its signboard barely standing out among the glamorous stores. The window was lined with ceramic and iron pipes of various sizes, as well as pipe rests. A small, glittering women's shoe, like a glass slipper, was on display. When he realized that it was a shoe-shaped pipe stand made of jade, he opened the door and asked the shopkeeper the price. It was affordable for Kazuya, who usually saved his allowance and avoided wasting money, so he bought it without hesitation.

"It's for a girl, so please put a ribbon on it," he said. "Oh, that red ribbon."

The clerk looked at the pipe rest. "It's for a girl?" he asked curiously.

Just as Kazuya happily exited the store, the door of the store next door also opened and out came Inspector Blois, who had shopped for something as well. He was in good spirits. The two looked at each other, and their faces turned grim.

The inspector glanced at the package in Kazuya's hand, and snorted.

Kazuya looked at the inspector's hand too. He was holding a rather expensive-looking, antique porcelain doll. It had curly blond hair and big eyes, and wrapped in a dress of laces. Kazuya frowned. The first time he went to the police station at the village, the inspector's room was full of dolls like this one. He even put one on his lap.

"Can't say I'm surprised," Kazuya said.

“Mind your own business, silly face.”

The inspector pointed to a towering brick building on the other side of the street. Several uniformed police officers were guarding the gate.

“I’m going to exhibit my brilliant intellect at the station now. See you later, Kujou.” Inspector Blois was about to walk away when he stopped, remembering something. He looked back at Kazuya. “Be careful,” he said.

“Be careful of what?”

“As you can see, Sauville has undergone rapid modernization in recent years. Roads have been improved, the number of tall buildings has increased dramatically, and tourists are pouring in from all over the place. But a bustling city means increased criminal activity.”

Kazuya looked around, and Inspector Blois frowned.

“Cities are terrifying. They can be glamorous and fascinating, but sometimes they open their big mouths and swallow up visitors. Then the city closes its mouth as if nothing happened, and those who were swallowed never come back.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I’m saying it’s become much more dangerous here. Have you heard the rumors of those who vanished in the dark?”

“No...”

“Over the past few years, there has been a series of incidents in Saubreme where people suddenly disappear. Mostly young women and children. They disappear after a shopping trip to a department store, or on the way to the police station with a lost child. The pattern varies. The police department has received numerous complaints from the families of women who disappeared. I’m guessing some of them just ran away from home. Still, an unusual number of people are disappearing into the darkness of the city. You best be careful.”

“O-Okay...”

Kazuya suddenly remembered the book that Avril was carrying.

“A noblewoman enters a fitting room in a department store. But when the clerk opened the door, all that was left was a bloody head.”

“There’s a story about a beautifully-dressed little girl crying. People call out to her, thinking she’s lost, and then disappear. When they turn a corner, they’re gone, and only their clothes are left.”

“There’s also a murderer who dresses as a hobo. He hangs dead children’s bodies inside his old clothes.”

I bet the horror stories in that book were based on actual disappearances in Saubreme.

Inspector Blois took a pocket watch from his pocket and checked the time. “I’ll see you around, Kujou,” he said in a hurry.

He headed toward a large building—the Sauville Metropolitan Police Department. He seemed to be used to the city; he deftly crossed the street, weaving through the stream of carriages, and disappeared into the building.

After watching the inspector go, Kazuya started walking.

There were many buildings, carriages, automobiles, and people in Saubreme. It was truly crowded. Everyone was going too fast. Perhaps because it was still mid-morning, the people hurrying along the sidewalks to get somewhere were all dressed in simple, practical clothing. They probably worked for companies in the area. Occasionally, a noble in an extravagant attire or three-piece suit would disembark from a carriage and disappear into an upscale tailor’s shop or gallery. Tourists of various skin color passed by. They walked around with maps in their hands, pointing from place to place.

Homeless people clothed in rags lurked around every corner, holding out dirty tin cans to passersby and begging for coins. There were old men and women. Sometimes there would be a child younger than Kazuya. Sauville, with its long history and rapid development, was a place where people from all walks of life gathered. It was as if they lived their lives at different paces.

“Huh?”

Kazuya was nearing the Sauville royal palace. Only its round roof retained its medieval beauty in this modernized city.

The flag of Sauville fluttered in the square in front of the palace. Guards in gold and red uniforms, looking like toy soldiers, strutted along systematically. A scene you’d expect from Saubreme, home of the royal family and a tourist destination.

“I thought it was somewhere around here,” Kazuya muttered.

He looked around, searching for the luxury department store Jeantan, his destination. It should be a large building across from the palace square.

When he opened his bag to pull out a map, he accidentally dropped his wallet. He managed to pick it up before it rolled onto the street, but his coins spilled out.

“Nine five seven,” said a small voice.

Kazuya, picking up the coins, looked to the direction of the voice. People passing by did not care about the coins that someone else had dropped. He frowned, wondering where the voice came from. Then in the shadows created by building decors, he saw a pair of glinting eyes.

“What is that?”

Kazuya stood up. A small figure with ominous dark eyes slowly emerged from the darkness

It was a child, only about ten years old, wearing dirty, ragged clothes. His toes stuck out of his sneakers. He had blue eyes, probably Caucasian, but he was so dirty that Kazuya could not make out the color of his hair or skin.

“The amount you dropped,” he said in a low voice. “I was watching.”

What a strange kid, Kazuya thought.

“If you were watching, you could have helped me.”

“If I helped out of the kindness of my heart, you would say that I pocketed some of the change and beat me up or hand me over to the cops. I vowed never to be nice to people.”

His dark eyes went to Kazuya’s hand. He was staring at it even when he wasn’t holding anything.

The child lifted his head. “Where are you headed? You don’t know the way, don’t you?”

“I’m looking for Jeantan. It’s supposed to be around here.”

“Not even close, you bumpkin. It’s a long walk from here. It’s kinda hard to explain. I can take you there if you want.”

“Really?”

“Give me a piece of paper.”

“Paper?”

The child stamped his foot and pointed to Kazuya’s wallet.

“The paper inside that thing. Give me one, and I’ll show you the way.”

“Ah...”

Kazuya hesitated at first, but decided that it would be cheaper than taking a horse-drawn carriage, so he handed the child one of the bills. With

a surprisingly quick motion, the child snatched the bill and hid it somewhere in his ragged clothes like magic. He then backed away, covering his head with both arms, as though trying to block a hit, and pointed to a building on the other side of the sidewalk.

“It’s over there.”

“Huh?”

“That’s Jeantan. See you around, dumb Chinese boy.”

“Crap... He got me. Hey, wait!”



Kazuya tried to chase after him, but the child quickly retreated and disappeared behind a building. Upon checking, he saw a small hole that looked like a drainage ditch leading underground, just big enough for a small child to fit through.

“I’m not Chinese!” Kazuya screamed.

He pulled himself together and walked away. The building across the street was huge and made of bricks, shaped like an octagonal cylinder. He failed to notice it earlier, but it looked old and prestigious, decorated with octagonal flags that bore purple ribbons and the word Jeantan. Shoppers with shiny, purple paper bags were coming out of the building.

As soon as Kazuya tried to cross the street, something grabbed him by the ankle. A large, cold, dry hand, like that of the dead, gripped his ankle tightly and would not let go. Startled, Kazuya looked down.

It was an old woman dressed in layers of rags. Her hair stood back as if blown up by the wind, and her skin was dry and stained black. She was barefoot. She had black hair and black eyes.

Holding Kazuya’s ankle, the old woman cried in accented French, “My daughter was eaten!”

Kazuya gaped at the old woman in shock. The old woman stared back at him.

Inside her bulging ragged clothes were three pieces of what looked like rolled cloth swaying with the old woman’s movements. They all swung in different directions, and looked somewhat creepy. Kazuya suddenly recalled one of the stories that Avril had told him.

“There’s also a murderer who dresses as a hobo. He hangs dead children’s bodies inside his old clothes.”

No way, Kazuya thought. Still, it’s a stunningly accurate representation of the story.

“My daughter was eaten by that thing!” the woman shouted. Her trembling, blackened fingers pointed straight ahead—to Jeantan.

The octagonal building glittered under the early-summer sun.

Kazuya regarded the old woman.

She was about to say something else, when a young doorman at the entrance of Jeantan came running toward them. He kicked the old woman as hard as he could, cursing at her. The old woman let out a pitiful shriek and scrambled down the cobblestone street like a wild animal.

The doorman turned to the stunned Kazuya. "I apologize, sir," he said. "That woman does that to all our customers."

"Does she always do that?" Kazuya asked, still shocked.

"Every day. We get rid of her when we notice."

Then that story must have been based on what's happening in Saubreme. That old woman must be the model.

"We truly apologize for the trouble." The young doorman led Kazuya into the octagonal brick building and opened the double glass door.

"Welcome to Jeantan. There is nothing you can't get here. Please, come in."

The building was high-ceilinged, spacious, and uniformly white. The vast floor was filled with piles of goods, and expensive jewelry, teddy bears, women's underwear, and other items were sold in individual stores, some of which were separated by glass doors.

The staff were all young men and women with pleasing appearance. They were of various nationalities, including a young Scandinavian man with chiseled features and a young girl with exotic olive skin.

Kazuya asked the young Scandinavian man about the location of the Blue Rose. In broken French, he told him that it was at the far end of the department store. Kazuya wondered why such a popular product was being sold way in the back, but he followed the directions and took the elevator to the top floor, then headed for the end of the corridor.

The higher the floor, the more classy the stores became. The white corridor went on and on. Despite the glittering signboards, there were no customers around.

"Is this the place?"

Kazuya stopped in front of a door. It was definitely the place the man told him about.

It was a room with no signage, and the door was not made of glass, but of sturdy oak. Doubtful, Kazuya gently opened the door. It looked like a store. Checkered tiles on the floor. Brown walls. A chandelier in the shape of a flower shone in the elegant room.

Sparkling jeweled watches, crown-shaped ornaments, and jeweled daggers were displayed inside glass cases.

There wasn't anyone around. Puzzled, Kazuya stepped inside.

"There it is!"

A Blue Rose paperweight was sitting carelessly on top of a glass case. A glass replica of the real blue diamond, it was transparent and sparkly, with a wonderful shape reminiscent of a large rose. It was just big enough to fit in the palm of Kazuya's hand. If it were a real diamond, it would cost a fortune.

There were also porcelain plates, brooches, and finely-crafted combs. Kazuya picked them up and studied them.

"Who's there?!"

Startled, Kazuya dropped all the items in his hands. He quickly grabbed the porcelain plate. The paperweight, brooch, and comb fell to the floor, but none of them broke despite the loud noise they made. He stroked his chest in relief.

"I-I'm sorry!" Kazuya said.

Picking up the items he dropped, he looked up to see three people standing there. One was a large man in a well-tailored suit. Seemingly in his mid-thirties, he was tanned and had a well-toned body. His gaze was sharp.

Behind him were a man and a woman in the purple uniforms of Jeantan's sales staff. The man was staring at Kazuya, while the woman had her head inclined.

The large man gave Kazuya a reproachful look. "What are you doing here?"

"I, uh... came here to buy a Blue Rose."

The two men looked at each other.

"Come back at night," the older one said.

"A-At night?" Kazuya looked puzzled. But they're open the whole day. "Why?" he asked.

"You wanted to buy a Blue Rose, no?"

"Yes. Three of them."

The two men slowly exchanged glances. The female staff whispered something to them from behind. The two men nodded.

"Three Blue Rose paperweights?"

"Yes."

"Head to the stationery section on the second floor, then."

"Oh..."

Kazuya left the room feeling confused.

He was lost.

It was not until a while after he rode the elevator down to the first floor and started walking down the dark corridor that he realized he had lost his way.

As he hurried back down the corridor, it dawned on him. When he left the room with the glass cases, he had inadvertently taken a different elevator than the one he had taken when he came up. He wondered if that was a service elevator. The lighting was dim, the floor was covered with strange reddish-black stains, and there was an odd smell that permeated the air.

The corridor where the elevator descended was also poorly-lit and very narrow. It felt suffocating. Simple, unadorned gas lamps hung in wide intervals from the high wall like sickles, illuminating Kazuya with a pale light. Between the lights there was a shadowy darkness, so deep that it was hard to see where wall and floor met.

The gas lamps flickered uneasily. It looked like they would go out at any moment. Feeling scared, Kazuya hastened back the way he came.

Then he heard a voice. He looked at his feet. The voice seemed to be coming from under the floor. He stopped in his tracks and listened closely, but he couldn't hear it anymore.

He resumed walking, when he heard it again.

"I knew it! I hear a voice... A girl."

Kazuya stopped again. He looked up at the ceiling. He thought he heard it from above this time. The ceiling was empty, of course, and the only thing he saw was some pattern made by a reddish-black stain of dirty water or something. It looked slightly like a human face.

"There are demons here!" someone shouted in his ear.

Kazuya yelped and turned around. There was no one there. At the edge of the corridor, there was only a pale blue darkness, shifting under the gas lamps.

Demons?

The gas lamp suddenly hissed loudly. Blue flames flared up to nearly the ceiling for a moment, illuminating the far end of the dark hallway. He spotted long, white objects tangled with each other.

Kazuya yelped. "...People?"

Several large, wide-open eyes were staring vacantly at him. The white things were limbs. Their bodies were twisted and entangled in an impossible manner, becoming one distorted mass, glaring at Kazuya resentfully with countless wide-open eyes. He cautiously approached them.

“Oh...” He stroked his chest.

What appeared to be a pile of fresh corpses was, upon closer inspection, all mannequins. Some were lying in their storefront poses, others were missing their limbs, and some only had their torsos.

At the far end of the pile of mannequins were a disorganized stack of crates. Through the half-open wooden boxes, Kazuya glimpsed white mannequin legs.

There was a peculiar reddish-black stain on the floor, the same as the one on the elevator. The stain was dry, seemingly old, with cotton-like dust on top of it.

Curious, Kazuya approached the crate with the closed lid at the far end. He opened it gently.

Inside the crate was a mannequin, curled up in a fetal position. Its long, sand-colored hair concealed its body. Before he closed the lid, he realized something odd.

Why was this mannequin's eyes closed?

A chill ran down his spine.

The mannequin's eyes snapped open.





Kazuya jumped and shrieked. Before he could back away, the mannequin spoke.

“There are demons here!”

It was a thick Russian accent. Her eyes were a deep purple, and glassy like a drop of thick milk. The girl sprang up from the crate and grabbed Kazuya’s wrists with both hands as he tried to escape. She was terribly strong. So strong, in fact, that it was hard to believe she was a girl.

But her hands were shaking violently. Her pearly teeth were chattering as she cried “Demons!” over and over again in an accented French. She spun around in an odd manner; one would think she wasn’t even human. With each twirl of her head, her sand-colored hair bounced up in the darkness and smacked Kazuya’s face.

“Wh-What’s... What’s wrong with you?!” Swallowing hard, Kazuya managed to ask the question.

But the girl did not listen, and instead, in a thick Russian accent, said, “Demons! There are demons here!” She screamed again.

She then pulled Kazuya and opened her thin, colorless lips. Two small, but pointed canine teeth peeked out from behind her lips, glinting in the pale light of the gas lamps.

“C-Call the police,” she said. “There are demons here. Lots of them! They’re gonna kill me!”

“What? Did something happen here? In that case, I’ll call the staff.”

“No. Call the police. The police!”

The girl released her grip on Kazuya and grasped her own neck. She groaned loudly, as if she was having trouble breathing. Kazuya backed away from the girl.

The gas lamps hissed again, flickered, then went out.

“H-Hello?” Kazuya called out to the darkness.

There was no reply.

Kazuya started running. He didn’t know what was going on. He just wanted out of there.

As he stumbled out of Jeantan, Kazuya whistled to hail a horse-drawn cab. The small, one-horse carriage was driven by an old man with a large scar running diagonally from right to left across his face.

Kazuya quickly got in. “To the Sauville Police Department, in front of Charles de Gilet station!”

The man nodded, his scarred face contorting.

Snap!

A whip cracked and the horse moved.

Kazuya looked up at the octagonal building. As he wiped the cold sweat from his forehead, he noticed two blue eyes staring at him from behind the building’s exterior decorations.

Small eyes. The eyes of a child. The one from earlier.

The peculiar street urchin that tricked him.

Kazuya recalled the child mumbling “957”. For a moment he wondered what the child was talking about, but there were more pressing matters at hand.

The child was staring at Kazuya. His lips seemed to curve into a smile.

Bedroom 2

“Achoo!”

It was a beautiful sunny day outside, and the sun was beating down on the intricate gardens spread across the campus of St. Marguerite Academy. At the farthest end of the gardens, past a hidden labyrinth of flowerbeds, was a small building—a candy house of some sorts, it seemed—that lay silent and still. The blinding midday sun barely penetrated through its windows.

The bedroom was dim, bobbin lace curtains draping over the French windows.

The feather comforter on the canopied bed was bulging. It squirmed a little. The bulge was small enough to make one wonder if it was a kitten that was hiding underneath.

“Achoo! Achoo! Achoo!”

The bulge quivered with every sneeze.

Victorique was dreaming under the covers.

In the dream, she was in a dark, circular room, books covering the walls. A small rocking chair, a table, and a bed peeked out from between the piles of books.

There was no exit. It was the room in Marquis de Blois’ tower, where Victorique had once been locked up. The round floor seemed to float in the air. Only a precarious ladder staircase from far below connected her to the world. Three times a day, a young maid brought tea, meals, and extravagant dresses. Once a day, the old butler came with a stack of new books.

In her dream, Victorique, who was twice as small as she was now, had her eyes downward. Wrapped in an elegant dress, she was reading a book on her lap, relying on the light shining through a square skylight far above her head.

I’m bored. Bored. Bring me more books. More.

Fearing the wrath of the Gray Wolf, the Blois family continued carrying piles of books up the tower. Victorique, a child of only ten years old or so,

kept moaning ominously, stamping her feet on the floor. Her husky voice seemed to shake the whole tower itself.

I'm bored. Bored. Give me something. Something to free me from this everlasting world of boredom. Give it to me!

Holding their breath, the Blois family shuddered as the creepy, husky voice echoed throughout the tower, night after night.

“Achoo!”

After a rather loud sneeze, the covers rustled. A small golden head peeked out from inside the comforter.

Usually her glossy hair cascaded down her back like an untied velvet turban, but today it was such a mess that it was hard to tell which was her face and which was the back of her head. When she sneezed again, her hair bounced, revealing a little bit of Victorique’s face.

Her rosy cheeks were crimson and puffed up.

Victorique moaned as she rolled across the bed. “Pain... so much pain...”

Breathing hotly, she reached for something on the bedside table with shaky hands. Her lips, redder than usual, parted.

“I... I...” Her dream—no, the distant memory tugged at her. “I’m boooooored,” she mumbled in her husky voice.

She reached for the pile of thick books nearby with quivering hands. Her vision was a little blurry. When she finally managed to pull the book into her hand, a broad smile appeared on her red face, and she started flipping through the pages.

A second later, she looked teary-eyed.

“I already... read this yesterday!”

She reached for a different book from the pile.

“Aaaaahh!”

Her blurry vision caused the entire stack of books to collapse. There was a series of thuds as all the books fell on the carpeted floor. Victorique hurried to get up, but she had no strength to do so. She peered over the bed and stretched her trembling hand, but she couldn’t reach the books.

Victorique’s face twisted in frustration. She turned over.

“Kujou,” she groaned. “Pick them up.” She sniffed. “I’m bored. So bored.”

“Kujou,” she groaned once more, and in a voice tinged with sadness, she added, “He’s not here, huh?”

She burrowed herself into the covers. The small, opulent bedroom was quiet now, devoid of human presence.

Outside the window, a small bird flapped its wings.

Ms. Cecile came through the flowerbed maze. She was carrying her teaching materials, textbooks, and a notebook.

As she stepped into the candy house, she peered into the small bedroom with a worried frown.

“How are you feeling?” she asked. “Oh, my.”

Victorique was hunched up in the middle of the big bed, her face buried in a book, forcing herself to read. Her hot breaths brushed the pages.

Ms. Cecile looked aghast. “You have to rest.”

“Great timing, Cecile.”

Victorique, her face crimson, rose unsteadily and pointed to the book she was reading.

“I was just reading a journal written by a certain priest in the Middle Ages,” she said breathily. “Achoo! He was a young priest who liked keeping a diary, which has served as a good source of information about life in those days.”

“Is that so?”

Victorique groaned at Ms. Cecile’s lack of interest, but regained her composure and continued.

“A problem arose on the night a bishop from the capital arrived at the temple located deep in the mountains of Sauville.”

“Ahuh...”

“Hngh... According to his journal, on such an important night, there was a theft in the village. Silverware was stolen from the house of a wealthy merchant. The merchant saw a man from his window running away.”

“Oh, no. Silverware is expensive.”

“Keep quiet and listen. A pig was also stolen from a farmhouse. The villagers were distressed. Why did these incidents have to occur the night the bishop was in the village? They wanted to show how pious they were. Outraged, the villagers immediately apprehended the likely suspects for each incident.”

“That’s great,” Ms. Cecile remarked.

“The men who allegedly stole the silverware were drifters. The villagers believed that they planned to sell the stolen goods in a different town. And the pig was allegedly stolen by a poor farm boy.”

“...”

“They were about to be judged by the angry villagers. The young priest described what happened that terrible dark night in great detail.”

“...”

“Right when they were about to be judged, the bishop arrived at the village. And then...”

Ms. Cecile took the thick book that Victorique was holding.

Victorique stared at the teacher with surprise. “What are you doing?!”

“Sick people should stay in bed. I’m confiscating your book.”

Victorique looked like she was about to cry. “S-Stop. I’m still in the middle of my story. You dunderhead!”

“I’m not a dunderhead, I’m your teacher. Get some rest now.”

Ms. Cecile held the book high above her head. Victorique tried to retrieve the book, but small as she was, she couldn’t reach it. She bit her red lips in frustration.

“I hate you!” she shouted.

“And I hate sick people who don’t rest.”

“Kujou would...” Victorique’s swollen cheeks puffed up even more.

“Kujou would have listened,” she said melancholically.

The teacher chuckled. “Yes, he would have. But I’m not Kujou, so I won’t listen to you. Get under the covers and close your eyes. Don’t move around! I’ll be back later.”

Ms. Cecile hurried out of the bedroom.

Chapter 3: Those Who Vanish Into the Darkness

“What on earth are you talking about, Kujou?”

Sauville Metropolitan Police Department.

The large brick building’s exterior was generously adorned, the entranceway lavishly decorated, but the interior was quite simple and practical. Footsteps echoed endlessly through the wide corridors as the staff bustled about.

In a spacious conference room on the fifth floor, Inspector Grevil de Blois, his golden drill-shaped hair glistening, was leaning back on a chair with a laced porcelain doll at his side. He seemed to be in the middle of a speech. He was wearing a frown, irked by Kazuya’s uninvited presence.

Around him sat a group of rugged-looking men, detectives from the police department. Kazuya whispered the situation to the inspector.

“What does that even mean?” Inspector Blois huffed. He flipped the doll and peered inside its dress. Shocked, Kazuya watched him from a distance.

“I see she’s wearing underwear.”

“Inspector! Listen to me!” Kazuya bellowed. “A girl in such a place asking for the police is weird, no matter how you slice it. There’s clearly something going on here!”

“...”

“Inspector!”

It didn’t seem like Inspector Blois would budge even a little. He began pulling on the doll’s undergarment.

The door to the conference room opened, and a man entered.

He had shaggy hair and his out-of-fashion suit said he didn’t care about what he wore. It was hard to estimate his age—he seemed somewhere between early twenties to mid-forties. He was wearing a pair of oddly-shaped square glasses, but behind those glasses, Kazuya noticed, were narrow eyes that were startlingly bright.

The moment the man stepped inside, Inspector Blois sprang up to his feet and pushed the porcelain doll to Kazuya. Astonished, Kazuya fixed the doll's undergarment.

"Commissioner Signore!" one of the detectives said.

The man of ambiguous age was apparently Mr. Signore, the Police Commissioner of the Sauville Metropolitan Police. Mr. Signore looked at Inspector Blois and the oriental boy by his side, who was earnestly fiddling with a doll's underwear.

"Long time no see, Grevil," the man said. "Mostly because you never come to visit. Didn't you receive my invitations?"

"Uhm, I had a lot on my plate..."

Kazuya was surprised. Apparently the two were longtime acquaintances. But while Mr. Signore spoke without reservation, Inspector Blois, for some odd reason, had his gaze downward the whole time.

Come to think of it, on the train to Saubreme, he mentioned Mr. Signore being a dull man...

"By the way, Grevil, I've heard about your exploits as a police officer. I look forward to what you have to offer in this case. Saubreme is quite unsafe at the moment."

"Is that so? It's different from the countryside, I suppose."

"That, it is. As in all of Europe, since the end of the last century, heretical practices and unfamiliar cultures from the colonies have become popular among the common folk. It has been on the wane since the Great War, but there are reports of Satanists now lurking in Saubreme, so we've been very busy with that. But from what I've heard from your accomplishments, crime is not limited to urban areas. It must be the times. I would like you to share your exceptional case-solving abilities with us."

Inspector Blois nodded proudly. Kazuya looked around. The other detectives in the conference room seemed to respect Inspector Blois as well. They were listening to their conversation with proper posture.

Kazuya nudged Inspector Blois and whispered, "Now, Inspector!"

"Now, what?" the inspector whispered back.

"Jeantan. There's definitely something going on there."

"I'm busy right now."

"Maybe I'll tell them about Victorique's Wellspring of Wisdom."

The inspector dragged Kazuya to the end of the room and began cursing in a whisper. Not to be outdone, Kazuya whispered back. They argued for a while, but eventually the inspector gave in.

“Fine,” the inspector said. “We’ll suspend the meeting and head to Jeantan.”

Mr. Signore and the detectives’ curious gazes darted between Inspector Blois as Kazuya dragged him out of the conference room, and the porcelain doll sitting on his desk.

Arriving in a horse-drawn carriage in front of the huge octagonal brick building—the department store Jeantan—Kazuya, Inspector Blois, and two officers pushed their way past the doorman standing upright in front of the glass door and entered.

The purple-uniformed sales staff of various nationalities looked at them, moving only their heads in unison. It was as though a flock of birds perched on a tree was startled by a sound, all looking in the same direction. Their faces were as expressionless as Noh masks.

Inspector Blois stood frozen for a moment, bewildered, then pulled himself together and turned to Kazuya. “What now, Kujou?”

Kazuya nodded and ran his eyes over the faces of the sales staff. When he spotted the good-looking Scandinavian man, he pointed at him.

“First, I asked him where the Blue Rose paperweights were sold.”

The young man cocked his head. “I apologize, sir, but I don’t think I’ve seen you before,” he said skeptically in broken French.

Kazuya remembered his Scandinavian accent. He stared back at the man, confused himself. “What? You just talked to me a while ago. I asked you where the Blue Rose was.”

“You must be mistaken. I’m afraid we’ve never met.”

The man insisted that he didn’t know the boy.

Kazuya was perplexed.

“Is there a problem?” asked a low voice.

Kazuya turned around and saw another familiar face.

A classy suit and a tanned, well-toned body. An imposing man in his mid-thirties, he was the one who shouted at Kazuya when he wandered into the room of glass cases on the top floor.

“I’m the owner,” he said. “My name is Garnier. What can I do for you?”

The name Mr. Garnier rang a bell to Kazuya. A successful young man who made his fortune after the end of the Great War, he purchased the long-established department store Jeantan a few years ago.

“We met upstairs, didn’t we?” Kazuya said. “Well, after that—”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” Mr. Garnier, too, tilted his head curiously.

Kazuya’s breath caught in his throat. The young sales staff slowly gathered behind Mr. Garnier, tilting their heads in unison. Their faces were devoid of emotion, yet somehow their expressionless features conveyed immeasurable malice.

“We met on the top floor, the room with the oak door,” Kazuya said, flustered. “There were a lot of glass cases inside!”

Perplexed, Mr. Garnier studied Kazuya curiously, then looked at Inspector Blois. “What is this oriental boy saying?”

“I, uhh...” Panicking, Inspector Blois nudged Kazuya. “Do something!”

An eerie silence descended. The staff slowly surrounded Kazuya, Inspector Blois, and the two officers.

Mr. Garnier laughed. “Only staff is allowed in that room,” he said.

“I went in by mistake,” Kazuya replied. “I was following that guy’s directions.”

Mr. Garnier turned to the young staff, but he shook his head, as though saying he had no idea what the boy was talking about.

“That can’t be right,” Kazuya said.

“So what kind of room was it, then?”

“Uhm...”

“If you really entered the room, you should be able to describe it!” Mr. Garnier’s voice rose all of a sudden.

Kazuya flinched, but he stood his ground. “Okay, then. Let’s see... the door was made of oak. There were many glass cases inside. The wallpaper was brown and the floor had checkered tiles. There was also a chandelier with a flower motif.” He turned to Inspector Blois. “Let’s check that room first. Then you’ll know that I’m telling the truth.”

The inspector nodded reluctantly and gestured to his two accompanying officers.

A flicker of unease flashed across Mr. Garnier’s face.

Kazuya took the elevator to the top floor with the inspector and the officers. Mr. Garnier and three young staff also joined them.

After exiting the elevator, they walked down a long corridor flanked by glass doors on both sides. They then entered a room at the far end, the only one with an oak door.

“First, I entered this room,” Kazuya said. “And then...” He froze.

It was a completely different room from the one before.

The wallpaper, which should have been an elegant brown, had changed to a gold one with garish patterns. The floor was covered with a crimson carpet, and the chandelier was not flower-shaped but ornamented with gold. The glass cases remained the same, but the decor was slightly different.

Inspector Blois turned to Kazuya with a look of distrust. “What happened to the brown walls, the checkered tiles, and the flower chandelier?”

“Th-This can’t be right!” Kazuya exclaimed. “I was just here an hour ago. And then I went to see you. I dropped a plate, a paperweight, a comb, and a bunch of other stuff, so I apologized to you. Right?”

Mr. Garnier shook his head gravely.

Kazuya was stunned. Then he pulled the inspector along the corridor. Mr. Garnier and his staff followed them, grinning.

“What is this all about?” the man asked.

Kazuya found the service elevator at the same spot. It was creepy, with a sour stench and reddish-black stains.

They got off at the first floor and walked down the eerie corridor illuminated by pale gas lamps. When Kazuya reached the area where the mannequins were stacked, he looked back at the inspector and opened the lid of a wooden crate.

“There was a girl in here,” he said. “She had sand-colored hair, and she said there were demons in here.”

Inspector Blois snorted. He shot Kazuya a dubious look and shook his head. “Oh, Kujou...”

Kazuya looked at the crate, and let out a despaired groan.

Inside was a figure curled up in a fetal position, its neck twisted at an unnatural angle. Wide-open dark eyes, looking up into the void. Sandy-colored hair.

A mannequin.

“No way!” Kazuya sank to the floor.

The vibration caused the crate to shake wildly, and the mannequin’s head snapped, rolling to Kazuya’s knees. The weight and the uncanny sensation made him scream.

Mr. Garnier held his belly and burst into laughter. The three young staff also joined him.

“Hahahaha!”

“Bwahahaha!”

“Hilarious! Ahahaha!”

Various emotions—frustration at being ridiculed, confusion—swirled inside Kazuya as he stared vacantly at their faces. The mannequin’s head was sitting on his lap.

Beside him, Inspector Blois looked appalled. “How could you mistake a mannequin for a person?”

“I-I didn’t,” Kazuya groaned.

Inspector Blois grabbed the mannequin by the hair, lifted its head, and stared at it. “Mass-produced products really lack that charm.” He tossed it aside.

The mannequin’s head rolled across the floor, bounced against the wall, and then stopped. Its wide-open eyes were directed upward.

No one tried to say anything.

Eventually, Mr. Garnier let out a sigh. “Are you done now?”

“Yes,” Inspector Blois said. “Apologies for the trouble.” He dragged the stunned Kazuya out of there.

Kazuya snapped back to his senses. “But I’m telling the truth! That room had brown walls and checkered tiles, and there was a real living girl in that crate!”

Mr. Garnier turned around. His amiable face flared with rage. “That’s enough! Any more insult to Jeantan, and I will have you arrested! Snap out of it already. You have never been in this department store! No one remembers you!”

“That’s impossible! I... I... definitely came to Jeantan!” Kazuya returned the man’s glare.

The inspector and the two officers dragged Kazuya out of the department store.

Just as they got outside, a familiar-looking coachman passed by with a passenger. On his face was a large scar running diagonally across from right to left. When he saw Kazuya, he quickly looked away. Kazuya whistled, but the man pretended not to hear him. Kazuya shook off Inspector Blois, jumped off the sidewalk, and stood in front of the carriage.

The horse neighed to a halt. The driver frowned, grumbling something.

Kazuya rushed to the man. “You picked me up earlier, didn’t you?” He turned to the dubious inspector. “Inspector! This guy is not a staff at Jeantan. He’ll vouch for me!” He turned his face back to the driver. “You gave me a ride earlier, right?”

The driver, puzzled, regarded Kazuya’s face, and nodded. Kazuya felt relieved.

“You picked me up after I came out of Jeantan and took me to the police station, didn’t you?”

The driver gave him a weird look. “What are you talking about?”

“Huh?”

“I didn’t pick you up here.”

“What?!”

Kazuya’s face twisted with distress.

The driver’s scarred face stretched into a bizarre smile. “I picked you up from Charles de Gilet station and dropped you off at the square in front of the royal palace. Did something happen to you?”

With a glance at Kazuya’s face, the driver shrugged, whipped his horse, and rode away. As Kazuya watched the carriage go, he felt a tap on his shoulder. Inspector Blois was staring at him with disappointment.

“I’m really telling the truth,” Kazuya insisted.

“I’m heading back to the station.”

“Inspector...”

“Enough.” The inspector called for a carriage, then with a stern look said, “Not only do you have no proof for your claims, but eyewitnesses disagree with your statements. Besides, you’re dealing with Mr. Garnier, a major figure in the business world. He may not be a noble, but he’s one of the most important figures in Saubreme, a rapidly-developing economic hub. He’s not someone you can discredit with mere speculation.”

“But...”

“And one more thing.” Inspector Blois bit his lip hard. “I want to knock the wind out of Mr. Signore’s sails. I don’t have time for this nonsense. I must prove myself here in Saubreme. Please don’t waste any more of my precious time.”

Kazuya refused to back down. “But Inspector. I really saw a girl asking for help!”

“You were daydreaming.”

“I wasn’t,” he mumbled.

He didn’t know what was what anymore. He just wanted to forget all about it, call it a nightmare.

But Kazuya could not forget the strange girl, the fear that lurked within her deep purple eyes.

He had never seen anyone with a face like that. A look of genuine fear. If that girl was not a ghost in his daydreams, but a real person, and if she really was in deep trouble, how could he just ignore her?

His earnest nature reared its head and refused to let him forget. But he did not know what to do. No one corroborated his statements. The room with the glass cases was different from the one in his memory, and the girl in the crate was gone.

“Just continue your shopping.”

The inspector smiled dryly and rode away in the carriage with the officers.

Hooves clattered along the old cobblestones. The glaring midday sun shone on the street and on the building glasses. Noon in an early summer was such that just standing around would make one a bit sweaty. The daylight seemed to make the nightmarish events that happened just moments earlier surreal.

Carriages passed by in front of Kazuya, who was lost in thought as he listened to the clattering of hooves, the voices of the people of Saubreme walking past, and the trumpets coming from the square in front of the royal palace.

“My daughter was eaten!” He felt a sudden tug at his clothes.
“Eateeeen!”

Kazuya turned around in surprise and saw a woman with a wrinkled face, dressed in rags. She was looking at him, the hands on his clothes quivering.

“She was eaten by the darkness!”

Kazuya didn't know what to do. A small hand, stained black, came from behind him. It yanked Kazuya with incredible force, pulling him away from the wailing old lady, and took him to a dim area with a drainage ditch.

“Give me a piece of paper.” A whisper right at his ear.

A pair of dark little eyes shone in the shadows, burning blue like will-o'-the-wisps. Skin blackened with soot and dirt, and disheveled hair whose original color was rendered ambiguous by dirt. It was the street urchin from earlier.

“I saved you from the old lady,” he said. “So give me paper.”

“You're not getting any,” Kazuya said firmly. “In fact, I should be asking for my money back.”

The kid snorted and gave Kazuya a dubious look. “You're pretty shrewd for a Chinese.”

“I'm not Chinese. Though I understand it's hard to tell the difference.”

“Oh, really now?” he said in a bored tone. He watched the street for a while with a frown. “So no paper from you.”

“Nope.”

“Tsk. Fine, then. By the way, why do you keep coming to Jeantan?”

The kid's words went past Kazuya's ears for a second.

Then suddenly, Kazuya gasped and turned to the kid, the motion so quick that the kid braced and shielded his shaggy little head with his hands, expecting to get hit.

“Did I enter Jeantan?” Kazuya asked with a serious face.

The kid peeked from between his arms, looking skeptical. “What are you talking about? Shouldn't you know that yourself?”

“No, I do. But that's not the point.”

The kid pointed to the clock tower in the square. Then with half-lidded eyes, he started talking rapidly in a strange inflection, as if something was controlling him.

“You entered Jeantan at 11:22. 11:46 you came out and got into a carriage. You returned at 12:09 with a nobleman with a weird hairdo and two officers. Then you came out at exactly 12:30.”

“Wow. You have a great memory,” Kazuya murmured in disbelief. The kid snorted and looked away.

“But yeah. I’ve been to Jeantan, that’s for sure. There’s no doubt about it. But for some reason, all the sales staff said they never saw me. And the carriage driver said he gave me a ride somewhere else.”

The kid’s cheek tightened. He was smirking. “Man, you’re dumb. If they were given paper, they’d easily lie. If Jeantan gave me a bunch, I would even deny meeting you. They must’ve received a lot from them.”

Kazuya fell silent momentarily. “But the room’s decor was completely different. The walls, the chandelier, the floor. They told me I must have been dreaming.”

“Give me some paper,” the kid demanded.

Kazuya reluctantly pulled out his wallet and handed over a bill. The kid grinned, swiftly hiding the bill somewhere on his body. Then with half-lidded eyes, he entered some sort of a trance.

“11:50, a bunch of men entered through the back door. They were carrying a lot of stuff.”

“What kind of stuff?”

“Cans full of paint, brush, and something that looked like a big roll of gold paper. A rolled up carpet. They were wearing overalls with paint on them.”

“Must be painters, then.”

“They came out at 12:04 with no gold paper or carpet, then hurried away in a carriage.”

“The golden paper must be wallpaper. If they didn’t have it when they came out, they must have used it inside. Probably in that room where the walls changed from brown to gold.”

The kid opened his eyes. “12:04 was five minutes before you returned,” he said with a yawn.

“Yeah. They must have quickly replaced the wallpaper and put down the carpet after I left. They should have plenty of chandeliers for sale, too.”

Kazuya shrugged. “If what you say is true, that is. How can you remember things so accurately?” He regarded the boy skeptically.

The kid scowled at him. His cheek quivered from having his pride hurt. “I don’t lie. I watched from across the street the whole time. I’ve seen things. But people don’t believe me because of how I look. So you don’t believe me either.”

“Actually...”

“I’ve been here a long time and know a lot of things. I even remember all the customers that entered Jeantan. See that woman over there?” He pointed to a woman carrying purple bags. “She went in two hours ago and just now came out. She did a lot of shopping. She’s carrying five paper bags.” He then pointed to an old man hurrying out the building. “And that man was only inside for three minutes. I can even tell what he bought. A walking stick. It’s not wrapped, but he didn’t have it with him when he entered. I’m guessing he didn’t bother asking for a bag because he was going to use it right away, and instead just removed the price tag. I watch Jeantan’s customers here every day.”

“I’m just—”

“Every month, a couple of customers don’t come out.”

“I’m just wondering how your memory’s so—wait, what do you mean they don’t come out?”

The kid frowned, and his whole body shrank in horror. “They went in and never came out the front or the back. Even after days. There are customers who enter Jeantan and disappear. All young women.”

“Shouldn’t you report it to the cops?”

“I *did* tell the cops,” he snapped, baring his yellowish teeth. “I told them about the disappearing women. But they just hit me. They thought I was lying. They beat me up and kicked me out of the station. They said there’s no way I could remember that accurately. That I was lying. I never said anything after that. I just watch from here.”

Kazuya stared at the kid’s face the whole time. He himself could not remember exactly when he entered and exited Jeantan. There was no way this kid could remember everyone who came in and out of the department store.

Yet strangely enough, he sensed credibility in his words. The old woman from earlier pointed to the department store and said that her daughter was eaten. Perhaps she meant that her daughter had gone inside and never came out.

And then there was the girl in the crate...

Ah! He suddenly remembered something.

When he first met this street urchin, he mumbled, “957”. At the time, he had no idea what it meant, but now that he thought about it, the kid said it when he spilled the coins from his wallet onto the street.

No way...

Kazuya took out his wallet and began counting the coins inside. He gave the kid and the driver bills.

The coins amounted to a total of 957.

Wow!

Kazuya turned his gaze back to the kid. He was incredibly sharp, but his face was dirty, and he was covering his head to avoid getting hit.

Bewildered, he tried to talk to the boy. "Can you—

"Give me back my daughter!"

The old lady appeared again and grabbed Kazuya. Jet-black, animal-like eyes glinted on her dirty face. She grabbed his collar with terrifying force, staring straight at him.

"Please find my daughter!" she cried in accented French.

"Uhm... please let me go!" Kazuya shouted.

The old lady retreated. Then she looked up at Kazuya in horror, tears forming in her eyes. "Please help me find my daughter!" Her voice faded, and she cast her gaze downward.

Like the wind blowing the clouds away to reveal the sun, the madness vanished from her face, and reason returned to her eyes.

"She disappeared from here four years ago," she said. "My daughter and I were tourists. We both entered that department store, but she never came out!"

"Seriously?"

"My daughter wanted a dress. I told her I would buy it for her. She took the dress and went into the fitting room by herself. I waited for her to come out, and when I opened the door, she was gone. There was nobody there." She started sobbing.

Kazuya suddenly remembered a very similar horror story he had heard from his classmate Avril—a noblewoman disappearing from a department store's fitting room. The old woman's story was very similar to a story from that book, which was a collection of rumors circulating in Saubreme.

Inspector Blois also mentioned a case about the ones who vanished into the darkness.

Perhaps customers really *did* disappear in Jeantan sometimes, and though the matter never came to light, rumors started spreading among the common folk.

Tears streaming down the old woman's wrinkled, soot-stained face created horrifying patterns. The wrinkles that ran along her eyelids hung down to her eyes. Her ragged clothes were bulging, as if they were filled with something.

Kazuya recalled another story that Avril shared—a killer disguised as a hobo with children's corpses hanging inside his clothes.

The old woman raised her voice, snapping Kazuya out of his reverie. "All their employees are weird. They say they never saw my daughter. Even the staff who recommended the dress said I'd been alone in the store the whole time. The doorman—everyone—said they never saw my daughter. They showed her the dress, said it looked good on her, and told her to try it in the fitting room. But no one listened to me. My daughter disappeared, and I never saw her again. It's been four years now. I don't even know if she's still alive!"

Kazuya thought about the second time he entered Jeantan. Everyone insisted that they had not seen him, and even the interior of the room he was supposed to have entered had completely changed. Not only that, he also saw a girl coming out of a crate, asking for help. He was sure of that.

Kazuya pondered it over for a while.

Slowly, he opened his eyes. He glanced at his hand. He was holding something—a wrapping paper with red ribbon. It contained a pretty pipe holder in the shape of a shoe, which he had bought at a pipe shop right after arriving in Saubreme. It was a souvenir for Victorique.

Kazuya thought about her.

I wasn't dreaming. If she were here, she would have solved the mystery in no time, yawned, and complained that she was bored again. Yes, if only you were here...

Her husky voice came to mind. ***"It's simple desire."***

A glimmer of hope returned to Kazuya's eyes.

The small, mysterious figure of his intelligent friend appeared in his mind. She once talked about the supernatural story trend in the quiet conservatory at the top of the library. He remembered the words she uttered in her husky voice.

"The desire for the unseen and the incomprehensible to exist. Some look to religion, because they have not yet seen God. Some look to love,

because they had not felt it. And some began looking to the supernatural.”

When he declared that he didn't believe in the supernatural, she said, ***“People who say such things tend to have cold feet when something inexplicable happens.”***

Kazuya nodded to himself. On his face was a smile of relief.

Victorique... Mean, whimsical, arrogant, and downright irritating Victorique... I'm sure you'd believe me and listen to what I have to say. Of course, you'd get mad at first, mock me, and hurl insults. But you'd nevertheless uncover the truth. All that's happened earlier was not a dream. They're just fragments, nothing but a headache for me, but for Victorique, they're fragments of chaos. She would reconstruct them in no time, providing a little relief from boredom for the Princess Locked in a Tower. Besides, she was just whining to me yesterday.

“Get yourself involved in some incident by tomorrow.”

“Don't worry.”

“I will solve the case once I feel like it.”

The last part was slightly, or rather *quite* disturbing, but Kazuya tried not to think about it.

He headed for the café across the street from Jeantan, with the odd street urchin following him behind.

The relaxing café, which opened onto the street, was crowded at lunchtime. Kazuya asked a staff if he could borrow their phone, and they gladly lent him one out front.

Kazuya picked up the phone. He asked the operator to connect him to St. Marguerite Academy.

“Did they have Blue Roses?” Ms. Cecile asked in a carefree tone.

“There's more pressing matters at hand, Teach,” Kazuya replied. “Please get me Victorique.”

“Did you suddenly want to hear her voice?”

“That's just creepy. It's an emergency.”

“Got it. I'll tell her that you called under the pretext of an emergency just to hear her voice.”

“I wouldn't do that! Hello?! Just give her the phone!”

Ignoring Kazuya's cries, Ms. Cecile put the phone down for a moment with a chuckle, leaving him on edge. He wondered what he would do if she

told Victorique exactly that. It was hard to imagine Victorique missing him or wanting to hear his voice if he was away. As a matter of fact, she might not even notice his absence. Even if Kazuya was away from school for a week or a month, Victorique would be completely unperturbed, blowing her pipe in her usual spot in the conservatory, buried in a pile of books, and when he returned one day, she would say, “Oh, it’s you,” like she always did.

A disgruntled glance would be the best she could offer.

Tsk.

The thought made Kazuya feel sad. And angry, for some reason. All of Victorique’s flaws flashed through his mind.

That bossy, stubborn, little crybaby...!

He felt dejected.

Victorique was still not on the phone.

The blinding early-summer sun shone on the cafe’s storefront, reflecting off the stone pavement.

Bedroom 3

Victorique's breath filled the dark, cramped, and humid space. Her increasing temperature made her feel like she was going to black out.

She closed her eyes and exhaled hot breaths in the darkness. She felt dizzy. With her small hands clutching the edge of the comforter, she slowly opened her green eyes and groaned. She was weak, but there was still a fiery glint in her eyes.

"I'm never getting out of here," she groaned.

A distressed sigh came from outside the darkness.

Ms. Cecile came through the flowerbed maze to Victorique's bedroom.

"Victorique, there's a phone call for you... Oh, Doctor."

Ms. Cecile stopped and glanced around.

In a corner of the room stood a small, elderly man in a white coat, wearing a frown. A square leather bag lay open on the small table. Holding a large, translucent syringe in one hand, the old man stared at Ms. Cecile.

Ms. Cecile looked toward the bed.

Victorique was not there. The bulging comforter was quivering. Ms. Cecile almost burst out laughing at the thought of what was under the comforter.

"Oh, my," she muttered.

"Cecile," the village doctor said. "As soon as I told her I'd give her a shot, this happened." He looked at Ms. Cecile with a deep frown.

"I hate pain! Achoo!" A breathless, husky voice came from under the comforter.

"It works because it hurts, Victorique," Ms. Cecile said.

"Lies."

"I'm not lying."

"..."

"Victorique!" Ms. Cecile tried to raise her voice, but her puppy-like image dampened any impact it might have had. The comforter still showed no sign of moving.

The doctor shrugged. “When I tried to remove the covers, she screamed. An otherworldly scream, that. She’s your student, isn’t she? Can you do something?”

“I-I’m not sure what I can do.” Ms. Cecile thought it over.

Silence filled the bedroom. There was no other sound, save for the occasional sneeze coming from under the covers. A breeze set the French windows creaking. Leaves glittered under the light of the early-summer sun.

“Ah!” Ms. Cecile clapped her hands together, then pointed toward the room next door. “I almost forgot why I came here. You have a call from your friend, Victorique.”

“Y-You’re lying.”

“H-How would I be lying?”

“I don’t have friends,” Victorique murmured sadly.

“Then what is Kujou to you?”

The comforter moved a little. Then stopped again.

Ms. Cecile glanced at the doctor.

“Kujou?” There was a hint of joy in Victorique’s voice.

“He’s calling from Saubreme. He says it’s an emergency.”

“Hmm...”

Ms. Cecile clenched her fists. Almost there.

“He was panicking. He might end the call soon.”

“Hmm...” The comforter shifted. “Stupid Kujou. Slow as always. His dumb face must have done something dumb that got him caught in a dumb situation.” She rose, her voice sounding a little excited.

Both Ms. Cecile and the doctor looked surprised. Victorique remained completely covered by the comforter as she began to move slowly, looking like a ghost. She got off the bed and headed toward the next room.

Ms. Cecile and the old doctor exchanged glances. Nodding, the teacher put one foot out, causing Victorique to trip and fall. She sneezed as she hit the floor.

“Now!” Ms. Cecile shouted.

Victorique’s little face, peeking from under the cover, contorted in pain. Her green eyes widened, and she slowly turned around with a look of disbelief.

Someone had grabbed her exposed arm. She saw the triumphant face of the doctor and the syringe stuck in her arm. Her face scrunched up, and tears fell from the corner of her eyes.

Victorique took a deep breath and let out a mournful, unearthly scream.

“You will both pay for this,” Victorique mumbled as she walked to the next room, crying and sneezing. “How can this bring my fever down? It just hurts.”

The doctor left triumphantly, bag in hand, and Ms. Cecile, chuckling, left for class. Victorique rubbed her arm, which still ached from the numbing injection.

She reached the next room and stood in front of the telephone. Weeping like a child, she wiped her tears repeatedly with the back of her hand. She reached for the receiver, sniffing.

With shaky hands, she put the receiver to her ear. She heard Kazuya’s frantic voice.

“Victorique? Is that you? Victorique! There’s trouble. Please listen. Hello? Can you hear me? Victorique!”

“Idiot!”

Victorique took her anger out on him. Kazuya was at a loss for words for a moment, then started grumbling furiously.

There was a rumble, and the sound of the receiver hitting something, followed by an unfamiliar, childlike voice.

“Twelve...” the voice mumbled.

Then a scream from Kazuya.

The call was abruptly disconnected.

Victorique stared at the receiver for a while. Then her cheeks bulged. She was mad.

“What in the world did you want, Kujou?! Do you know how much I sacrificed to get here?! You made me get an injection. It hurt a lot! Yet I still answered the phone!”

Victorique’s shoulders slumped, and she tottered back into the bedroom. With trembling hands, she picked up the feather comforter from the floor, heaving as if it weighed a ton, and somehow managed to put it back on the bed. She exhaled.

Breathing hotly, she flopped onto the bed, her face even redder than before.

Soon, Victorique's labored gasps turned to soft breathing.

Silence filled the bedroom once more.

Chapter 4: Anastasia

“Idiot?! You’re the idiot, Victorique! I haven’t even said anything dumb yet. Why do you always have to be so rude? For the record, I’m not being bold just because I’m on the phone. Anyway, I suggest you treat me better from now on. Hello? Victorique? Are you there?”

There was a drumming of hooves on the cobblestones.

Kazuya looked over and saw a carriage turning the corner at a terrific speed, coming to his direction. The carriage ran up onto the sidewalk, and the ladies on foot screamed and ran for cover.

A pale, thin arm, with dark-purple fingernails, reminiscent of the dead, reached out from inside the carriage, stretching toward him.

A warm wind blew.

The street urchin stood shocked as the creepy arm grabbed Kazuya. His eyes darted to the clock tower. “12:51!”

Screaming, Kazuya was pulled into the speeding carriage with terrifying force. The blackish, dirty face of the kid who was just with him on the street receded into the distance.

Kazuya tried to resist, but the pale arms gripping him tight would not let him go. The carriage accelerated. He couldn’t jump off at this point. Slamming his head on the seat, he shook off the arm and turned to his captor’s face.

“It’s you!”

Like a fishing line being reeled in, the arm retreated back swiftly, and the girl shrank back into the corner of her seat.

Her pale arm was shaking violently, even more than the carriage running across the cobblestones at incredible speed.

Wearing a grimy, simple white gown, she was hunched over, her scrawny kneecaps lit by the lamps swinging on the carriage walls. Her bony chest and full breasts, a discordant sight, peeked in and out of the gown’s chest.

Her ears were covered with trembling fists, and her face was half-hidden by her disheveled, sandy-colored hair. Her pale lips were parted, her mouth wide open like a gaping cave.

The girl inhaled, and let out a piercing scream. It was the shrill cry of an animal. Her hair rustled, allowing a glimpse of the wide-open, purple eyes sitting above the pale hand that covered her mouth.

Misty, pleading eyes, cloudy like a drop of milk in water.

“The girl in the crate?”

The girl raised her head. When she saw Kazuya’s face, her large, purple eyes widened. “Demons!” she gasped. “There are demons in here!”

The carriage slowed down, heading in some unknown direction. Hooves echoed softly on the street.

Baffled, Kazuya calmed the girl down. “Why were you in that crate?” he asked. “Where do you usually stay? I went to get help, but when I came back, you were gone.”

“I-I’m scared,” the girl mumbled, cradling her head, shaking it. She was breathing heavily. “I’m scared! Scared!”

She looked up and reached for Kazuya’s cheek. Her hand was so cold and moist that he let out a yelp. Too cold for a living being. The air inside the carriage was getting colder as well. Just one touch seemed to chill his very core.



“What’s your name?” Kazuya managed.

“Name... Yours?”

“It’s Kujou. Kazuya Kujou. And you are?”

“I’m...”

The girl started spinning her head round and round. It was spinning so fast that Kazuya thought the centrifugal force would send her head flying off into the distance. Her sandy-colored hair flew up in the cold air. Kazuya distanced himself from the girl.

Eventually, the girl calmed down, and a hint of a smile appeared on her face.

“I’m Anastasia.”

“Anastasia?”

She nodded with a smile. An adorable motion unbefitting of the current situation. She brought her face close to Kazuya’s cheek. Her skin was as cold and dry as ice.

Anastasia’s cheek touched Kazuya’s. “I was... going to... be sacrificed to demons,” she said in broken French. Smiling, she crumpled to her seat.

Kazuya helped her up. Every part of her scraggly body was cold, and his fingers felt numb.

Maybe she doesn’t understand? Kazuya wondered. What’s this about demons?

He managed to bring her upright. Anastasia was shivering, her eyes closed, but slowly she opened them and peered into Kazuya’s face.

“I was in Jeantan.”

“That’s right. You were in a crate at the end of the corridor.”

“We were locked up.”

“What?!”

“With other girls. In a secret room in Jeantan. It’s huge. It was locked, so we couldn’t escape. There was an eagle with two heads.”

“An eagle? What?”

“The room had a window, where I could see the royal palace of Saubreme. The palace looked pretty. So sparkly. But it was scary, so I ran away. People came, so I hid in the crate.”

Kazuya didn’t know what to say. The words of the strange old lady in front of Jeantan flashed through his mind.

“My daughter and I were tourists. We both entered that department store, but she never came out!”

Avril’s story about people disappearing in a department store. The peculiar street urchin’s account of customers who went into Jeantan but never came out. And the frequent disappearances in Saubreme as a whole—those who vanished into the dark.

Although confused by Anastasia’s statements, Kazuya put on a serious expression, and placed his hands on her shoulders. “You were locked up, yeah? Are there others still inside? If so, we have to report it to the police. The inspector wouldn’t believe me earlier, but if I bring you with me.”

“The demons prevent escape.” Anastasia’s cloudy, purple eyes widened, and she ruffled her dried, sandy-colored hair. “Demons come and perform a ritual. They lock us up for the ritual.”

“I know you can’t speak French well, but I need you to explain it clearly.”

“Demonic rituals! Demons! Demonic rituals!”

Anastasia’s hands balled into fists and she pounded on Kazuya’s chest repeatedly.

“What do you mean?!”

“I don’t know. Strange rituals. We are sacrifices. Demons surround us and recite weird incantation. They raise their hands like this.” She raised her hands and waved them around. Tears streamed down her grimy, pale cheeks. “Demons only talk to demons. They stare at us. One by one, we disappear and never see them again. The demons kill them. Only the cold coffin containing the bodies of those who have disappeared return.”

Kazuya was perplexed. He was starting to think that this case was more than he could handle.

First things first. I gotta take her to the station for her protection.

Kazuya opened the small window that led to the driver’s seat. He asked to be taken to Sauvillie’s police station.

The carriage gradually slowed down and stopped at a corner of the street where the station was located. The two disembarked. After paying the fare, Kazuya helped Anastasia walk to the station.

“It’s all right now,” he assured. “We’re at the police station. Calm down, and tell them what happened.”

“O-Okay...” Anastasia nodded. She blinked, and tears formed in her cloudy, purple eyes.

Meanwhile...

Inspector Grevil de Blois was in Sauville Police Headquarters’ conference room, surrounded by detectives.

Inspector Blois, cradling his pointy head, stared at the lists in front of him. On his lap was an expensive porcelain doll, wobbling with his restless foot-tapping.

A list of artworks that disappeared from Sauville’s royal treasury during the height of the Great War, a list of treasures left by the Romanov dynasty in Russia and stolen goods smuggled from the colonies, a list of brokers, and a list of collectors who buy stolen goods with gold coins.

The detectives watched Inspector Blois with bated breath. They were eager to hear the famed inspector’s deduction, but the man himself was more interested in the conversation going on in the conference room next door.

In the next room, Mr. Signore was discussing the secret Zoroastrian congregation spreading in England, murders committed by worshippers of the Indian evil goddess Kali, and the growing number of African witchcraft enthusiasts in France.

People returning from the colonies were secretly introducing foreign cultures in their home country.

In Sauville, police were currently investigating reports about Satanic rituals.

While Inspector Blois listened to the horrifying conversation, smoking his pipe, a knock came at the door. Everyone raised their head.

A young detective whispered something. Inspector Blois frowned and stood up.

“What in the world is this about, Kujou?” Inspector Blois entered a small room where Kazuya was waiting. “I told you to stop... wasting... my time...” His eyes widened when he saw the emaciated girl slumped next to the boy.

“Who is that?” the inspector asked.

“Please listen to what she has to say.”

“I’m asking you who she is.”

“Her name is Anastasia, the girl I found inside the crate in Jeantan. She escaped on her own after that.”

“Not Jeantan again. I told you I have no time for that.”

“She says...” The door opened, and Mr. Signore appeared. Kazuya continued. “She says there are others like her locked inside. If I recall correctly, there have been many disappearances in Saubreme. Those who vanished into the dark. You said that the city’s darkness swallowed them, and I think I know where its mouth is. Jeantan.”

“That’s enough!” the inspector snapped.

“Grevil,” Mr. Signore interrupted. “How about listening to what she has to say?”

Kazuya looked at the inspector. Fiddling with his doll, he nodded reluctantly.

Kazuya urged Anastasia to speak. Her purple, jewel-like eyes widened, and she began talking in broken French.

Anastasia was an immigrant from Russia. The daughter of a wealthy noble family, she was forced to flee her country during the Russian Revolution of 1917. Her father died in Russia, followed by her mother in Western Europe, where they fled. She came to Sauville alone. She supposedly had distant relatives here, but since she could barely speak French, she had difficulty seeing them.

“It was night, and I was standing on the street. I found myself in front of Jeantan. There was a mannequin in a beautiful dress in the display window. I thought it was beautiful. So beautiful that I almost cried. Then a young sales staff came out and said, ‘Come and try it on’. But I hesitated. You go to a department store to buy things. You need money, and I didn’t have any. Then the staff laughed and said, ‘You can just try it on in the fitting room. It’s free.’ I should have realized that something was off. But I wandered in, picked up the beautiful dress, and entered the fitting room. When the door closed, the mirror opened. The mirror was also a door. I was dragged into the mirror, blindfolded, and taken to another room. When I came to, I found many others like me, crying. And then we...” Her voice trembled. “...we couldn’t leave any more. We were trapped in the looking glass.”

Kazuya's breath caught at the words "fitting room". Both the old woman and Avril mentioned the same thing.

"There's something about the fitting rooms in Jeantan," Kazuya muttered. "And there's a place in the building where they're hiding the missing people. I don't know why they're doing this, though."

Anastasia stood up. She took a deep breath, shook her head, and screamed.

"Demons. Many disappeared, devoured by the demons. There are demons in Jeantan performing demonic rituals!"

Tears streamed down her face as she started sobbing. Inspector Blois stared at Anastasia with a dubious look on his face. Mr. Signore, on the other hand, looked serious.

"After the ritual, the girl with us disappeared and never came back until later that night... in a coffin. Her whole body was covered in bandages. I called her name, but she wouldn't answer. I touched her, and she felt cold. She was already dead. Just moments earlier, we were cheering each other up. What did the demons do to her? Why? Why did they take us? So I ran away. I escaped from that room. And then..." She took one deep breath and fell unconscious.

Mr. Signore rushed out into the hallway and told a young detective to call a doctor.

Inspector Blois frowned. "I'm going back to the art case. Kujou, you stay here and think about what you did."

"What? Why? Why do you siblings keep telling me to think about what I did? No way. I did nothing that warrants reflection. Where are you going?"

"Working on the case assigned to me. There's clearly something wrong with this girl. Are you sure it wasn't just all in her head? There's no evidence to prove her claims. Anyway, this is the last time I'm humoring you. Besides, reflection is a sign of growth."

"Look who's talking!"

Ignoring the boy, Inspector Blois exited the room. Kazuya followed him to a conference room full of detectives.

"Those who vanished into the darkness disappeared somewhere in Saubreme," Kazuya said. "It must be in Jeantan. Girls and children that entered and never came out."

Inspector Blois turned around. "But can you prove that these women actually disappeared in Jeantan?"

Kazuya stood frozen. All eyes were on him, eyes that said he would not be able to do it.

"I can," he declared.

A stir ran among the detectives. Kazuya himself was surprised at what he said.

"I'll bring a kid I know. In the meantime, Inspector, I need you to gather photos of the missing people in Saubreme. And make sure you mix in photos of irrelevant people. I'll be right back!"

Kazuya dashed out of the conference room, down the corridor, and out of the station.

"K-Kujou?" Inspector Blois mumbled in confusion.

The street in front of Jeantan was more crowded in the evening. The sound of footsteps filled the sidewalks.

Kazuya looked around. He couldn't quite find the person he was looking for. Suddenly he remembered something. He went to the drainage and peered into the shadows.

"You there!"

"Hmm? Oh, it's just the dumb Chinese," came a bored reply.

Kazuya felt relieved. "I could use a little help."

"Will you give me paper?"

Inspector Blois' face popped into his mind, and he nodded. "Yes. Lots of paper."

"So what do you need?" The street urchin stepped out of the shadows. A dirty face with glistening blue eyes looked up at Kazuya. It was hard to tell the original color of his soot-stained hair.

"You told me that every month there are a couple of customers who enter Jeantan and never come out. I need you to explain that in detail."

"Why?"

"I think something horrible is happening in Jeantan. A girl I met asked for help. She said something about demonic rituals and people getting killed."

"Demonic?" The kid snorted.

Kazuya nodded. “That’s what she says. Anyway, just come with me to the station—”

“The station?!” The kid turned around and scurried back into the ditch.

Kazuya grabbed his arm, but he was getting pulled into the ditch as well, so he put his arm around the kid’s neck. “Please! People’s lives are at stake. This might be a major crime!”

“I don’t want to go to the cops!”

“It’ll be fine!”

“No!”

“Why not?”

“Because...” His voice weakened. “I’ve been to the cops before. Some girls didn’t come out, so I told them about it. But they beat me up with their batons. They said I was making things up. It hurt so much.”

He began sobbing. Kazuya regarded his face. The little boy stared back at him with tears in his blue eyes. Two lines of tears spilled down his dirty face, revealing fair skin underneath. He wiped the tears away with the back of his dirty hand.

“A girl who escaped asked me for help once. But there was nothing I could do. A guy chasing her caught her. I went to the police, but they wouldn’t open the front door. They just wiped the dirty spot made by my fists. They didn’t listen to me. I never saw the girl again. She was about the same age as me.” He was crying now. “No one listens to me.”

“I will. I’ll listen to you. And the cops will listen as well. I know a police inspector. I promised him I would take you with me. Right now, they’re gathering lots of photos. I’ll be right by your side making sure they don’t hurt you.”

Like an actual child, the street urchin clung to his neck. As Kazuya patted his grimy head, the kid cried louder and louder.

People glanced at them as they hurried past.

“What’s your name?” Kazuya asked.

“What’s yours?”

“It’s Kujou. Kazuya Kujou.”

“I’m Luigi,” the kid said.

They started walking down the pavement, hand in hand. The sun was slowly setting. It felt cooler now.

Luigi was afraid of carriages, saying he had never ridden in one before, so Kazuya decided to walk to the police station. They hurried along, weaving past crowds of people.

Kazuya stopped in front of a building on the street near the Charles de Gilet station. It was a foreign-styled yellow building shaped like a pyramid. The wide-open entrance and the ticket window marked it as a theater. Large posters of glamorous and obscene shows hung outside.

Luigi looked at Kazuya curiously. “Do you like this sort of thing?” he asked.

“Uh, no, not really...”

Kazuya pointed to a poster for a show titled “Phantasmagoria,” which humorously depicted dancing skeletons, a beautiful levitating woman, and a headless man holding his own head in his hands. It bore the words:

Amputation! Mechanical Turk! Teleportation! and next to a red-haired man in a black tailcoat, it said: **The Greatest Magician of the Century, Brian Roscoe, Finally Performing in this Theater!**

Wait... Brian Roscoe?!

The name sounded familiar. Was it a coincidence? Or was it the same person?

Victorique’s image popped into Kazuya’s mind again. He thought about her past, her birth, how she grew up locked in a tower.

Brian Roscoe.

Kazuya remembered the photo of Cordelia Gallo that Victorique cherished. Cordelia, her mother who looked exactly like her, but with glossy, mature makeup. She came from a nameless village deep in the mountains where the descendants of an Eastern European tribe called the Gray Wolves lived. She was banished from the village for a crime she did not commit and eventually became a dancer in the city, but it was said that mysterious incidents occurred frequently around her. Later, Marquis de Blois, who wished to introduce the blood of the Gray Wolf into his bloodline, made her give birth to Victorique de Blois, but she was banished from the Marquis’ family when the Marquis learned of her alleged crime. Her daughter Victorique, whom she left behind, grew up locked in a tower. She was now a student at St. Marguerite Academy, but an agreement between the Marquis and the academy prevented her from leaving the

campus. So even if she could manage to stuck out, being ignorant of the outside world, she would be lost without Kazuya.

Her mother, Cordelia, was said to have played some kind of role in the Great War that followed, but Kazuya did not know anything about it. But he knew that just before the Great War, a mysterious young man named Brian Roscoe visited the nameless village where Cordelia was born and raised, found something that Cordelia hid under the floor of her house, and took it.

However, he knew not exactly who Brian Roscoe was, or what he took from that house.

“What’s wrong with this poster?”

Luigi’s voice brought Kazuya back to his senses.

I’m sure it’s just someone sharing the same name. Yup, that’s it. Besides, now’s not the time for this.

“Sorry for the hold-up. Let’s go.” Kazuya pulled on Luigi’s hand.

A large carriage pulled up in front of the theater. A group of young men rushed out of the building and bowed gracefully in unison.

A man with fiery red hair jumped down from the carriage.

He had cat-like green eyes and hair the color of flames. He had handsome chiseled features reminiscent of ancient sculptures, but also a fierce nature, apparent at first glance.

Kazuya realized that he was the Brian Roscoe depicted on the poster. Landing on the pavement, Brian extended one hand and pointed to the carriage. Four men entered the carriage and came out, carrying something unusual.

It was a square box with a puppet attached. The puppet, as big as a child of Luigi’s age, had two thin arms outstretched to a chessboard placed on top of the box. It was a bearded man with a Turkish turban.

“A Mechanical Turk!” Luigi exclaimed. “I’ve never seen one before!”

“A what?”

“It’s amazing. The box is empty, which the guests confirm, and it’s not even big enough for an adult to fit inside. But the puppet moves on its own and plays a chess match with the audience. And it’s so good that no one can beat it. The Mechanical Turk is extremely smart. It’s a very popular show right now. See that guy right there? That’s Brian Roscoe. It’s one of his best tricks.”

“Really, now? Does he have any other tricks?”

“There’s teleportation... But there’s something off with that guy. There were a few times when it didn’t seem like a trick, like he was really in two places at the same time. He would enter Jeantan, not come out, and then go back in a few minutes later. He would appear in one side of the road and the other at about the same time. He pretends to be a magician, but I think he’s the real deal. Let’s go, Kazuya Kujou. I’m curious about the Mechanical Turk, but that guy gives me the creeps.”

“Uh, okay...”

As Kazuya walked past the carriage, Brian moved his chin a little and stared at Kazuya.

Cat-like eyes. Fiery hair. The wary look on his face sent a chill down Kazuya’s spine. He couldn’t look away.

Brian Roscoe grinned and directed his attention back to the men carrying the Mechanical Turk.

“Be gentle to her, boys.”

The men stared at the bearded puppet’s funny face and laughed.

“She caught a cold this morning.”

The men laughed again.

Kazuya and Luigi walked away from the theater.

“Achoo!”

The men exchanged glances. They all shook their heads as though to say it wasn’t them. Then their gazes slowly went to the Mechanical Turk.

The box was light and very small, not big enough to hold a person inside.

Brian Roscoe smirked at the men, who looked uncomfortably silent. His flame-red hair danced ominously in the wind.

“I told you. She caught a cold. Carry her as gently as you can.”

With frightened faces, the men carried the Mechanical Turk slowly. As they disappeared into the theater, Brian wiped out his smirk, and with dark eyes looked at Kazuya and Luigi as they receded further away.

The pair was soon swallowed by the crowd.

Kazuya returned to the police station with Luigi.

When he barged into the conference room, the detectives all rose to their feet, startled. They stared at the dirty street urchin, covering their noses,

looking like they wanted to get out of there. Kazuya pulled Luigi to the middle of the conference room.

Inspector Blois, too, was stunned. “Who’s that, Kujou?”

“A witness.”

The detectives shared looks.

“His name’s Luigi,” Kazuya continued. “He’s been in front of Jeantan for years and has seen a lot. And he has incredibly good memory. He can testify.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“Luigi, how many detectives are in this room?”

“Forty-two,” the kid replied boredly.

The inspector stared at Kazuya with a puzzled expression. When Kazuya signaled with his eyes, the inspector reluctantly started counting the detectives. It was surprisingly difficult to count them all since they were sitting in different spots. Not only that, but some moved, and others came in and out.

“Line up and count off!” the inspector ordered.

The detectives glanced at each other and began forming a line. “One, two, three...” When there were only a few detectives left, a stir ran among them.

“Forty-two,” the last one mumbled.

The detectives regarded Luigi.

Kazuya nodded. “Smart kid, huh?”

“I don’t like smart kids,” Inspector Blois muttered.

He sat Luigi down in a chair and showed him photos of girls. Luigi shook his head at the first few photos and brushed them aside.

“I’ve never seen these girls before,” he said.

Inspector Blois gave Kazuya a reproachful look.

“I know this lady,” Luigi said, pointing to a woman’s photo. “She comes to Jeantan three times a week and buys lots of stuff. She’s still alive and kicking. Saw her yesterday.”

One of the detectives looked distressed. “He’s right...!” he mumbled.

Kazuya had no idea what it was about.

“We ran out of random photos to throw into the mix, so I confiscated photos of the detectives’ wives and daughters that they carry around,”

Inspector Blois whispered. “The woman seems to be his wife. Must be rough having a shopaholic wife.”

“Ah, I see.”

When Luigi saw the next photo, he suddenly took a big breath. All gazes were on him. His eyes and lips were partly open, as though in a trance.

“Last winter. February 12th. 3:05 PM. She entered Jeantan, and that’s it. She never came out.”

One of the detectives compared the photo with some documents. His face paled visibly, and he handed the document to Inspector Blois. The inspector’s face turned red.

“This girl right here,” Luigi continued. “Spring this year. May 3rd. 7:12 PM. She never came out.”

Another document was passed around.

“Summer two years ago. August 30th. 11:02 AM. Never came out.”

The detectives stared at Luigi’s half-open eyes like they were looking at something horrifying. One after another, documents were handed out, and those who looked through them were rendered speechless.

Kazuya stood up and peered into the documents.

All the women in the photographs Luigi had selected were those who vanished in the darkness. Women who suddenly disappeared somewhere in Saubreme and have yet to be found. The time of their disappearance matched with the date and time that Luigi recounted.

Inspector Blois groaned. “So these people really did disappear in Jeantan?”

The conference room was filled with a strange silence.

“What’s going on, then? Why do people disappear in Jeantan? What’s their purpose? We need clues.”

This would be the time when the inspector would come to St. Marguerite Academy, climb to the top of the library, pretend to be talking to Kazuya, and use the Wellspring of Wisdom of the little detective, Victorique. But that wasn’t possible at the moment. They were in a city far from the village, and Victorique was not around.

Kazuya wanted to solve this mystery. But no matter how hard he tried to wrap his head around it, he didn’t know what to do.

“I know!” Kazuya exclaimed.

Inspector Blois turned to him. “What is it, Kujou?”

“I called Victorique earlier. Though I wasn’t really able to talk to her... Let’s explain everything that’s happened to her and ask for her help. I’m sure she can clarify things for us.”

“No.” Inspector Blois’ response was immediate.

“Wh-Why not?” Kazuya asked, confused.

“Because the price is too great.”

Kazuya cocked his head. “Price?”

Inspector Blois did not answer. The clock ticked away.

In the corner of the conference room, Kazuya heaved a deep sigh. “Let’s call Victorique, Inspector. I’m sure she can help.”

“No! I don’t wanna!” the inspector shouted.

The childish remark caught Kazuya off-guard. “Why are you so against it? And what exactly do you mean by price?”

The inspector pouted like a child and remained silent for a while, but eventually he opened his mouth, albeit with hesitation. “If you really want her help, then *you* ask for it. Do *not* mention my name.”

“What?!” Kazuya snapped.

The inspector was doing the usual thing, and it pissed him off. He would rely on his sister’s help, but when the case was solved, he would insist that he did it on his own and take all the credit. And for some reason, he was always scared of Victorique.

“Be reasonable,” Kazuya said. “*You* ask for her help.”

“You can ask for help all you want, and you’ll be fine. But not me.”

“Huh?”

“You don’t understand, Kujou. That... thing is a... Gray Wolf. A terrifying creature. You don’t know anything yet. I’ve learned the hard way that the cost of asking for help is terribly high. And I’m not alone on this one. It’s everyone from the Blois family.”

“Victorique is a terrifying creature?”

Kazuya laughed a little. He remembered the time when Victorique tripped over his foot and fell flat on her face, how she looked teary-eyed when he flicked her forehead, and the way she glanced around in wonder at the things she’d never seen before.

It was, however, true that Victorique was incredibly smart and had a very complicated personality.

“You’re just exaggerating,” Kazuya said.

“You don’t know anything yet,” the inspector repeated.

Kazuya chuckled. “You’re talking about her devilish demands, right? You pay a price for her help. I think it’s adorable.”

“No, it’s not!”

“Isn’t it just bringing her some rare snacks, or finding mysterious cases? Sure, Victorique can be a little bit mean at times...”

“Snacks? Cases? Are you stupid?”

“What did you say?!”

The inspector sighed heavily and pointed to his head. “Do you know why I’m wearing my hair like this?” he asked with a serious face.

Kazuya had no answer. He stared at Inspector Blois’s blonde hair, twisting like a drill and fixed using hair gel.

“I thought you liked the style,” Kazuya said.

“Of course not! Are you insane?!”

“Victorique said it was genetic.”

“That little twerp...”

Inspector Blois stamped his feet like a child. In a way, his immature and feisty response was oddly reminiscent of Victorique.

Yup, they’re siblings all right, Kazuya thought as he watched the man.

Eventually, Inspector Blois calmed down a bit. “It happened five years ago,” he began. “She was still in the Blois family’s tower back then. I went to check on her from time to time. She was a creepy Gray Wolf, but she was my sister. I was curious how she was doing.”

Kazuya recalled what Victorique had said about her brother Grevil de Blois when she showed him the “magic ring” yesterday.

“I was locked up in the tower, and for some odd reason Grevil came to see me every day and silently observed me, which I found quite creepy.”

“Victorique told me just the other day about how her brother was so creepy back then because he would stare at her without saying a word.”

“*She’s* the creepy one! She’s too smart! Apathetic, showed no interest about her family, and just indifferent. She was terrifying.” He breathed a deep sigh. “One day, I had to ask the horrid creature’s help... It was for a certain lady.”

Inspector Blois’ face turned a little red. “I really wanted to solve the case. The lady was about to be charged with a crime she did not commit. I steeled myself and climbed that dark and eerie tower to ask for her help.

The mind of a Gray Wolf is a horrifying thing. The case was solved in no time at all.” Inspector Blois pointed to his hair. “As payment, I’m to forever keep this hairdo.”

“Did you know it was weird?”

“Of course I did! But I made a promise!” He heaved another sigh and took his pipe out from his pocket with shaky hands. He lit it, took a puff, and let out a smoky sigh. “That’s not all. I asked for help again two years ago. She was already in St. Marguerite Academy then. I had just become a police inspector and I really wanted to make a name for myself. The case was quickly solved with her help, of course, but ever since then, my two men have to hold hands at all times.”

“I thought they were just close.”

“That one wasn’t so bad. They’re childhood friends, though not close enough to walk hand in hand. I mean, we’re talking about grownups here.”

Kazuya could not believe it. He was finally beginning to understand what the inspector meant when he said, “The privilege you enjoy is so odd, it’s like getting free money from an unscrupulous loan shark.” At the same time, he was stunned at how childish Victorique’s demands were despite her claims that they were devilish.

Why did she help him when they first met?

Sure, she asked him to bring her some rare delicacy, but it was not a taxing demand, and more importantly, there was nothing devilish about it at all. The spite that she usually wielded with all her might in her small hands was nowhere to be found.

Perhaps Victorique actually treated him way nicer than most people? By her standards, of course.

Then he remembered the reply he received before he left the academy. It contained only the word “Idiot.” And when he called her earlier for help, she just said idiot. Anger flared within him.

“You keep pestering me for cases, saying you’re bored, but when I got one for you, you’re too grumpy to even listen!”

“What are you talking about, Kujou?”

“N-Nothing...”

Kazuya sighed.

The detectives were whispering at each other, staring in their direction. They were getting impatient.

Kazuya stood up and asked a nearby detective if he could use the phone. “I just want to call a friend,” he said.

Kazuya turned to the inspector, who kept mumbling under his breath. “Fine. I’ll ask her myself. But this is the last time I’m doing this.”

“Remember: *you’re* the one asking her for help.”

“I get it already. A man does not go back on his words. You look like you do, though.”

Kazuya grabbed the receiver, and asked the operator to connect him to St. Marguerite Academy.

Bedroom 4

St. Marguerite Academy, far from the reach of Saubreme's hubbub, lay in silence at the foot of the mountains.

The faculty room on the first floor of the large U-shaped school building was the most modest and practical room in this otherwise luxurious school. The desks, chairs, wallpaper, and other furnishings were sparsely decorated. The whole space was brown overall.

On the large desk in the middle sat a young, petite woman. Ms. Cecile. She was grading exams, reading the students' answers and expressing her admiration at some of them.

"I've been at this for hours and I'm still not done," she grumbled. "I wonder why... Maybe dwarves are coming at night adding papers to the stack." She looked up and sighed.

The phone on the wall started ringing. She quickly got up and picked up the receiver.

The operator told her that someone was calling from Saubreme's police department. For a moment Ms. Cecile was rattled, but when she heard Kazuya's voice on the other end of the phone, she calmed down.

"Oh, it's you," she mumbled in relief. "Did you want to hear Victorique's voice again?"

"Yeah. Let's just go with that." He didn't sound very genuine. Ms. Cecile smiled. "I've been away from Victorique for a day, and I'm just dying to hear her voice. Happy? I'm in a hurry, so please give her the phone."

"Okay. I'll be back in a minute."

What's he so mad about? Ms. Cecile wondered.

Darkness was creeping in on the huge flowerbed maze in the corner of the campus. White, and pink, and yellow petals swayed uneasily in the wind.

Past the labyrinth, in a small bedroom of a small house, Victorique was curled up inside the comforter of her canopied bed, not moving an inch.

Ms. Cecile opened the door softly and peered inside. Staring at the bulge on the comforter, she murmured, "Is that her?" She poked it with her finger.

"Who is it?" came a husky, arrogant voice from under the covers.

"You have another call."

"Oh, it's you." Victorique shifted.

After the painful injection, she returned to bed and fell asleep. Either the medication proved effective, or she fainted from the shock. She felt like she just had a strange dream, but she couldn't remember what it was.

Victorique opened her eyes, but her vision was still blurry from the fever. Her head also hurt, and she could not think straight.

"I'm done with you," she hissed vacantly.

"Is that so? But you're good friends with Kujou, right?"

"He's... my stupid servant, yes."

"Oh, okay. If you say that to him, he'll get angry. You don't want him angry, right?"

"Indeed. He's so annoying when angry."

Victorique slowly rose from the bed and poked her head out from under the covers. Ms. Cecile looked surprised. Victorique brushed the long golden hair out of her face with her small hands, frowned at her sweaty nightgown, and then turned to Ms. Cecile.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Your face is beet red."

"..."

"Was the shot not effective?"

"Phone... phone... phone..."

Victorique rose to her feet, but staggered and fell on her buttocks. It felt as if someone had slapped her small and round bottom. She almost cried from the pain, but she held back the tears and stood back up.

She wobbled again, so Ms. Cecile put Victorique back on the bed.

"Just stay in bed," the teacher said. "I'll tell Kujou myself."

Victorique frowned. "I'll take the call," she said stubbornly.

"No, you can't."

"I said I'm taking the call!"

Hugging a large pillow, Victorique tottered to the next room.

“Victorique! Are you there? What took you so long? I bet you were reading a thick Latin book again, eating macaroons, saying ‘Who’s Kujou?’. Hello?”

After all that effort of picking up the phone, Victorique felt like hanging up now.

Stupid Kujou... Always with the annoying tongue. And he’s even worse over the phone...

Only the fever prevented her from cursing at Kazuya.

Before she could speak, Kazuya said, **“We have a huge problem over here. And I mean *huge*. People are disappearing from a department store, a girl was rambling on about demons before she fainted, and this room in the department store changed completely. So—”**

“Kujou...”

“What?”

“I don’t know what’s going on, but I’m hanging up.”

As she was about to put down the receiver, she heard Kazuya scream. Frowning, Victorique reluctantly brought the phone back to her red ear.

“Don’t hang up, please! I need your help!”

“No, you don’t.”

“I truly believe you’re a kind girl who cares about her friends.”

“You’re not fooling me.” She was holding the heavy receiver with shaky hands. Her legs were wobbly, and her arms were getting tired, so she sat down on the floor and leaned against the wall. **“Explain it to me,”** she said in between gasps.

“Really?”

“Yes. I am bored. It better be an interesting case.”

“It is. It’s a strange case, and I can’t make heads or tails of it. But I don’t know how you’d feel about it. I still don’t know what it would take to stave off your boredom. Sorry.”

“No need to apologize. Start from the beginning. What you said just now made zero sense.”

She could hear Kazuya taking a deep breath. Breathing heavily, Victorique listened carefully.

Kazuya began recounting everything.

A female classmate had told him about stories set in Saubreme, the capital of the Kingdom of Sauville. A young lady entered a department store's fitting room and disappeared, leaving only a bloody head, and someone disappearing after following what seemed like a lost child. There was also a story about a killer pretending to be a hobo, walking around with children's corpses in their clothes.

Kazuya also told her about how he met Inspector Grevil de Blois on the train to Saubreme. The inspector told him about the frequent disappearances happening in Saubreme over the last few years, a case dubbed "*Those Who Vanished Into the Darkness*." He thought that perhaps the stories were based on real incidents.

Inspector Blois was asked by the Saubreme Metropolitan Police Department to investigate the smuggling routes of art works that disappeared during the war.

Kazuya, upon arriving in Saubreme, got lost in Jeantan and entered a strange room. When he returned with the police, the room had changed, and a girl he saw had been replaced by a mannequin. The sales staff insisted that they had not seen him before.

Later he met the girl again, and she was scared. She claimed she was dragged into the looking glass through the fitting room, and that others with her were being sacrificed in demonic rituals.

"Achoo!"

While listening intently, Victorique sneezed.

"What was that?" Kazuya asked, startled.

"Achoo! Achoo! Achoo!"

"Are you sneezing? What a weird sneeze!"

Victorique slammed down the phone, breathing hard. Her fever was rising.

Ms. Cecile appeared. "Victorique, it's Kujou again."

"Hmm?"

"He's very mad. Did you have a fight?"

"*He's* mad? The nerve!"

Breathing hotly, Victorique took the receiver with trembling hands, then crouched down on the floor again. She shivered.

"What is it?"

“Why did you hang up?! You idiot!”

“What?!” Victorique gave a start.

“Listen,” Kazuya said. “If you hang up again, we’re done.”

Victorique was on the verge of tears. “I don’t want that,” she said shakily.

“Me neither! Wait, what?”

Kazuya sensed something wrong.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, creeped out. “The Victorique de Blois I know is not this meek. Are you not feeling well? Oh, right. You caught a cold this morning. Did your temperature go up?”

“It did,” she growled.

For a while Kazuya rambled on about some incomprehensible cold remedy from his country. **“Sauville leeks should be fine. You stick two of those in your nose. And sour pickled fruit in your belly button. Also... Hello? Are you listening? I guess you don’t really care, huh? Oh, you got a shot? You should be good, then. Must’ve hurt, huh? You cried from a forehead flick, after all! Hello? Are you mad at me?”**

“I will never help you even if you were in mortal trouble.”

“You’re such a handful. If you don’t help, then you’re just another mean girl.”

Victorique’s green eyes widened and grew moist. Squeezing the receiver tight with both hands, she said, “I-I’m not mean...”

“Then help me!”

Kazuya was bossier than usual, and a little mean. Her mind hazy from the fever, Victorique realized that he was acting brash because he was talking to her over the phone from somewhere far away. Her eyes glinted. She was thinking about how to torment Kazuya once her fever broke and he returned to the academy.

“Kujou,” she said. “Find a paperweight.”

“...For what?”

Chapter 5: The Darkness of Jeantan

“A paperweight?” Kazuya asked.

Inspector Grevil de Blois, who had been furiously listening to Kazuya’s and Victorique’s exchange, suddenly brought his ear close to the receiver. His drill-shaped hair stabbed Kazuya’s cheek.

“Ouch!”

“What’s going on there?”

“Your brother just came at me like a madman. Go away!”

“Is Grevil there?” Victorique’s voice turned grim.

Kazuya turned to the inspector, who instantly moved away from the phone, struck a pose, and shook his head as if to say, ‘I’m not here.’

“He is. But he says not to tell you that.”

Inspector Blois stared daggers at Kazuya.

“I’m the one asking for help, not the inspector. If there really is someone out there kidnapping people, I have to do something. I think Inspector Blois just wants to impress or something. He’s dead set on making a name for himself in Saubreme.”

“Ah, Jacqueline!” Victorique muttered.

“Jacqueline?” Kazuya said, glancing at Inspector Blois.

The inspector turned away as soon as he heard the name. It was the same name that Inspector Blois blurted out when he spotted a lady down at the train station.

Victorique gave no signs of answering Kazuya’s question. She seemed to be suffering from a much worse cold than he had thought. She occasionally gasped for air and barely managed to speak.

“Did you find a glass paperweight?”

“Give me a sec.” Kazuya looked around the conference room. He spotted a rugged glass paperweight sitting on top of a stack of papers. “I found one.”

“Take it.”

“Done.”

“Lift it up.”

“Okay... done.”

“Drop it on the floor.”

Kazuya fell silent.

“Just do as I say—Achoo!”

Kazuya looked around the conference room. The detectives were staring at him with bated breath, wondering what he was doing. Following Victorique’s instructions, he dropped the paperweight to the floor.

The hunk of glass fell slowly.

The moment it hit the hard floor, it shattered into pieces.

For a moment, Kazuya just stared at the smashed paperweight. “It shattered,” he said.

“Do you get it now, you simpleton?” She coughed.

“G-Get what?”

“Why did those guys at Jeantan lie to you? The answer lies in front of you. It’s why they changed the decor after you left, and why they insisted that they never saw you.”

“...”

“You dropped a lot of things in that room: a metal comb, a brooch, and a Blue Rose paperweight that was supposed to be made of glass. But the paperweight didn’t break. Why is that?”

Kazuya’s expression changed.

“Because the Blue Rose that you dropped was not made of glass.”

“Really?!”

“If it were glass, it would have shattered. But a real diamond would not break. What you saw in that room was not a paperweight...” Her voice trailed off for a moment. **“It was the real Blue Rose,”** she said clearly. **“Stolen from the royal treasury of Sauville during the Great War. I believe the entrance to the darkness that is Jeantan is also the site of the illegal art trade that Grevil is so eager to find.”**

The door to the conference room opened, and the detectives assigned to the missing persons cases entered. The Police Commissioner, Mr. Signore, entered last, regarding Inspector Blois silently.

The inspector squared his shoulders. “I believe both the smuggling and the kidnapping are happening in Jeantan.”

He wished to raid Jeantan and search for evidence. A few detectives agreed with him, but most were skeptical and concerned about the high social status of the owner, Mr. Garnier.

Inspector Blois repeated his theory, and when asked if he would take responsibility, he said in a hard tone, "If I'm wrong, I will resign from the force."

Kazuya was taken aback by the serious expression on his face. He had never seen the man look so serious in all the cases he investigated back at the village. The inspector was so determined to pull off something big in Saubreme. Kazuya assumed that he became a police inspector for fun. He never thought he'd be wanting a career at headquarters.

Mr. Signore gave his approval to search Jeantan.

Dusk was slowly settling on the dry streets of Saubreme.

A hundred police officers from the police department surrounded Jeantan. The face of Inspector Blois, the man leading the charge, was full of confidence.

"What is the meaning of this?" Mr. Garnier, the owner of Jeantan, regarded Inspector Blois with a thin smile. When he saw Kazuya beside him, he raised an eyebrow. "Is this about this morning?"

"No." The inspector showed him a document issued by the police department and stamped by the Police Commissioner, Mr. Signore. "We have a search warrant for Jeantan. We're coming in."

"What are you looking for exactly?"

"Missing girls and the Blue Rose."

For a split-second, Mr. Garnier's expression changed. Then the next instant, he started laughing. Inspector Blois gave a start. The staff behind Mr. Garnier laughed as well.

There was no emotion in their faces. They were as expressionless as Noh masks.

Kazuya looked away.

Amid the laughter, the officers entered Jeantan.

"Did you find anything?"

"No, sir!"

"Search harder! It must be here!"

Shouting at each other, Inspector Blois and the officers continued examining the inside of the department store.

Kazuya followed the inspector to the room where he had first wandered in, a room full of glass cases.

The glass cases were full of sparkling and glamorous items, but none of them were stolen art or particularly expensive. The officers checking the storage area below also reported finding nothing.

They couldn't find neither the artworks nor the missing girls. Only fake paperweights and jewelry in the room above, and mannequins in the storage area.

Inspector Blois paced around irritably. "That can't be right!" he hissed. He slammed his fist on a glass case and bit his lip. "Kujou," he called. "The secret lies inside Jeantan. The Blue Rose you found was in a room in the department store—here. And the Russian girl you brought with you told us that they were locked in a room in Jeantan. She said she could see the royal palace from the window. And when a little girl asked Luigi for help, she came running out of here." He paused, then in a frustrated tone, added, "Everything should be here, inside."

"Yeah." Kazuya was kneeling on the floor, deep in thought.

"What are you doing?" Inspector Blois asked curiously.

"When I first entered this room and found the real Blue Rose, the wallpaper was brown and the floor was covered in black and white tiles. The chandelier was also flower-shaped. It was an elegant room. But when I returned here with you, the wallpaper had changed to gold and the chandelier had changed shape too. The items in the glass case had been replaced, and the floor was covered in a red carpet. The room was transformed into something sickening."

"Yes. What about it?"

Kazuya grabbed the edge of the red carpet on the floor and pulled as hard as he could.

"I see," the inspector breathed.

Black and white tiles appeared from underneath, gleaming coldly.

"Mr. Garnier tricked us!" Slowly, he rose to his feet.

Kazuya and Inspector Blois stood there, staring at each other.

Hearing shouts from the police officers, Kazuya and Inspector Blois rushed into the high-end women's clothing department on the third floor of Jeantan.

The officers were examining one of the fitting rooms.

The voice of the strange old lady came to Kazuya's mind.

"My daughter wanted a dress. I told her I would buy it for her. She took the dress and went into the fitting room by herself. I waited for her to come out, and when I opened the door, she was gone. There was nobody there."

Kazuya and the inspector looked in the direction the officer was pointing.

The door to the fitting room was open. It was surrounded by walls on three sides, the furthest wall having a mirror. The mirror moved slowly. Kazuya and the inspector exchanged glances.

"I waited for her to come out..."

Beyond the mirror was a small room that could hold three to four people.

"...and when I opened the door, she was gone."

"There was nobody there."

Anastasia's voice sprang to mind this time.

"I entered the fitting room. When the door closed, the mirror opened."

"I was dragged into the mirror."

"I found many others like me, crying."

"We were trapped in the looking glass."

Kazuya shuddered.

The looking glass. This small room is the place that Anastasia was talking about!

The officers searched the small room and found nothing.

Mr. Garnier shrugged. "It's a storage space," he said. "We barely use it, though."

"But—"

Inspector Blois cut Kazuya off. He then produced a pocket watch from his pocket and glanced at it. A hint of panic flashed in his face. Kazuya bit his lip.

"I understand what you're trying to say, Kujou. There's a hidden room at the back of the fitting room. The girls who entered the department store and

never came out may have been taken from here. But we have no evidence. None at all. This is not enough proof. If they insist it's just a storage space, there's nothing we can do."

"But still!"

"Why are people disappearing? Their motives also remain a mystery."

Kazuya recalled Anastasia's voice.

"Demons come and perform a ritual. They lock us up for the ritual."

"Demonic rituals! Demons! Demonic rituals!"

"We are sacrifices. Demons surround us and recite weird incantations. They raise their hands like this."

Kazuya shook his head. Inspector Blois also bit his lip in frustration.

"Anastasia said something about sacrifices for demonic rituals," Kazuya said.

"That can't be true," the inspector replied. "What we need to find is the missing artworks from the royal treasury. And then the girls who disappeared from here. We need concrete evidence. It must be in this department store somewhere. We *have* to find it."

The inspector glanced at the pocket watch again. Kazuya looked at it as well. It was 6:30 PM. The light from the setting sun shone on them through the window.

The police officers stared at Inspector Blois with puzzled looks. Mr. Garnier and his staff stood at a distance, grinning.

"We're gonna run out of time soon," Inspector Blois mumbled.

Kazuya sighed heavily.

Mr. Garnier and his employees approached the officers.

"I think it's time to give up, gentlemen," the man said with a small smile. "It's already been an hour. I doubt you'll find anything. After all, there are no hidden rooms in Jeantan."

"No—"

"Enough!" Mr. Garnier roared. "Now get out of here!"

Kazuya stepped forward. "Excuse me, can I borrow your phone?" Inspector Blois tried to say something, but he cut him off. "I know. I'm the one asking for help."

"You better mean that."

Mr. Garnier regarded them quizzically, but eventually nodded. "I suppose that's fine."

“Thank you.” Kazuya gave a small nod.

Bedroom 5

Dusk was slowly creeping in on St. Marguerite Academy, painting the vast campus a bright orange. The air, hot and humid during the day, had cooled, and a pleasant breeze whistled through the gardens occasionally.

The office on the ground floor of the main school building was quiet.

Ms. Cecile was standing by the wall with fear in her eyes. She was in front of the telephone, holding the receiver.

“Yes, I understand.” Her voice was grim, her expression dark. “Our monitoring was inadequate. We are terribly sorry.”

She could hear the happy chatter of students passing by outside. It was almost curfew. Students who had been spending their time all over the place were on their way back to their respective dormitories.

“Please, Marquis Blois,” Ms. Cecile said in a hard voice. She hesitated a little before continuing. “I promise you that nothing like that will ever happen again. We have increased the number of guards and I’m constantly reminding her myself. And the student who went with her is a straight-laced boy. He accompanied Victorique and made sure she got back to the academy safely. If I tell him not to do it again, he really won’t do it again. He’s a trustworthy student. Yes...”

Ms. Cecile listened to the other person’s voice before interrupting. “If you could leave her to us a little longer. I promise we’ll watch her closely. No, a monastery is too much. She won’t fit in. Even now, Victorique doesn’t attend classes. She’s not used to people yet. Introducing her to an all-female ascetic lifestyle will not... end well.” She muttered the last few words with a sigh.

“Please, leave her to us,” she repeated over and over before hanging up. She put down the receiver with a heavy sigh, and hung her head for a while.

Then suddenly she lifted her head. She looked angry. Her eyes were wide open, and her large, round glasses were slipping off.

“A monastery? What a horrible man! Only nasty nobles would come up with that idea. Argh!”

She swung her right leg up and tried to kick the back of the nearest chair, but she miscalculated and hit nothing. Her skirt flipped and her white muslin petticoat and muslin underwear billowed out. At that exact moment, an older teacher entered the office.

“What are you doing, Cecile?” they asked, pressing their glasses.

“Oh, uh, nothing.”

“You were dancing by yourself, weren’t you?”

“N-No. I wouldn’t do that.” But she couldn’t tell them that she tried to kick a chair and missed.

“You should take it easy, Cecile. You’re no longer a student. You’re a teacher now.”

“I know.” Ms. Cecile sulked and turned her back on the old teacher.

The village doctor, the gardener, and now this nagging old teacher. There were surprisingly many people who knew about her life as a student—she wasn’t particularly bright back then either—in the academy. She would always get told to get her act together, which caused her stress.

The phone in front of her started ringing, and she quickly picked it up. The operator told her that it was from Saubreme, this time from a department store called Jeantan. Ms. Cecile was a little annoyed, but relieved to hear Kazuya, a student she particularly liked.

“Hello? Kujou?” She sounded a little happy. “You really love listening to Victorique’s—”

“**No!**” the boy snapped.

Chapter 6: Alexandrite

“So, you see, Victorique. We almost got it, but we’re kinda stuck. Inspector Blois might get fired if we don’t do something. Not that I care, really. We just can’t find the hidden room.”

“**Kujou,**” Victorique said. “**You sure talk a lot.**” She sounded like she was gasping for air.

“R-Really?”

“**You’re starting to piss me off.**”

“I-I’m sorry. I’ll be quiet.”

“...”

“...”

“.....”

“.....”

“.....”

“Victorique? Are you awake?”

“**Shut up!**”

“S-Sorry.”

Kazuya hung his head and waited patiently. He could hear Victorique groaning on the other side.

“**Kujou,**” she said finally.

“What is it?”

“**Get some Blue John.**”

“...What?”

Blue John was the name of the fluorite that Victorique used to threaten Inspector Blois when she was a child.

Victorique’s cold was much worse than Kazuya had expected; she would pause occasionally to catch her breath.

“**If there’s a secret room where they’re hiding the kidnapped girls and children...**” She paused. “**Its window should be facing the square in front of the royal palace.**”

“Why?”

“The girl you helped said she could see the royal palace from the window, didn’t she?”

“Oh, right!”

“Mark all the windows facing the royal palace with Blue John powder. Write down numbers from right to left so it will be easy to see. It will be 7 p.m. soon.”

“What happens at seven?”

“It’s closing time. When the store is closed and the lights are turned off, all the windows will be illuminated with blue phosphorescent numbers.” She paused for breath again. **“But there will be no number on the window of the secret room.”**

“I see.”

Kazuya pulled his face away from the receiver and called Inspector Blois. After whispering the instructions she had given, the inspector nodded and went to give orders to the officers.

Kazuya thanked Victorique, but before he could hang up the phone, she said, **“Kujou, I’ve only heard the case from you, but...”**

“What is it?”

“Hmm...”

“Anastasia kept talking about demons and demonic rituals. And an eagle with two heads. What do you think she meant by those? Apparently, Satanism and bizarre religious rituals from the colonies are secretly spreading in Europe.”

“There’s no such thing as demons, Kujou.”

“Yes, I know that, but still.”

“It’s not demons, but humans. The two-headed eagle she saw...” Her voice grew weaker.

“Sorry for pushing you so hard,” Kazuya said worriedly. **“I’ll make sure to bring you back a souvenir.”**

“I don’t want any. It’s probably going to be something weird again.”

“What?!”

“Anyway, it’s not demons.” Victorique’s voice dropped low. **“Do you remember the Alexandrite ring?”**

Kazuya recalled the ring that Victorique had on her finger. A mysterious ring that changed color to red or green depending on the light.

“You mean the magic ring, right?”

“Yes.” Victorique gasped for air. “This case is just like an alexandrite. It changes color if you look at it from different angles, but it’s the same stone. Do you understand?”

“Nope. Not at all.”

An exasperated silence came from the phone. Victorique grunted, then mumbled in her husky voice, **“I believe something terrible is happening in the secret room.”**

Kazuya and Inspector Blois, along with the police officers, ran around the department store, writing numbers from right to left in all the glass windows facing the palace square.

Fluorescent powder stuck to their hair and clothes. When they were done marking all the windows from the first to the sixth floor, Inspector Blois took out his pocket watch and checked the time. It was almost seven o’clock, closing time for Jeantan.

Kazuya and Inspector Blois nodded at each other, then frowned, realizing that they were acting like partners.

“Stop looking at me,” the inspector said.

“That’s my line.”

They exited the department store and headed toward the square.

Despite it being early summer, the sun had already set. The square in front of the royal palace was lit by a number of dim gas lamps, but the darkness was as thick as a dark swamp. The guards, in their resplendent gold-and-red uniforms, surrounded Kazuya, the inspector, and the police officers, eyeing them suspiciously.

The inspector ignored them and pointed at Jeantan. “Look!”

It was exactly 7:00 PM.

The lights in Jeantan, the largest department store in Saubreme, filled with luxury goods and foreign staff from all over Europe, all went out at once.

For a moment, it was completely dark. Then slowly, in the darkness, numbers written in Blue John powder began to appear.

The guards stood frozen, regarding Jeantan curiously. Kazuya scanned the numbers on the windows, starting from the first floor.

Second floor.

The third floor.

And the fourth floor.

There was a large window on the fifth floor between windows numbered 12 and 13, with no number written on it. It was most likely covered by curtains. He could see faint light from inside that dimmed and brightened occasionally, a sign that people were passing by the window.

Kazuya pointed at the window, and Inspector Blois nodded.

In the dark square, the Blue John powder in Kazuya's hair and on his clothes began to sparkle. The tip of Inspector Blois's drill-shaped hair was also glistening blue. Kazuya and the inspector nodded to each other again, frowned, and took off.

Mr. Garnier and his staff gathered on the ground floor was surprised to see the officers returning with a grim look on their faces.

The man frowned. "What's going on?"

"We want to check a room on the fifth floor."

Mr. Garnier swallowed, and so did his staff. He shot his employees a glance, and they charged straight at Kazuya and the others.

The Jeantan staff grabbed them immediately, giving no time for escape. The officers fought back, brandishing their batons, but they were bit or thrown with ridiculous force. Despite having similar numbers, the officers were having trouble.

Inspector Blois screamed as two female staff grabbed his legs.

The most aggressive one was a blonde-haired, brown-skinned, mixed-race staff. Holding a sharp knife in one hand, he took flight, aiming at the officers' vital points. In his hand was a military knife used in the Great War. The officers covered their vitals with their arms. Blood splattered every time their arm was cut.

Mr. Garnier shouted something to the young man, and he turned to his boss.

"Get that oriental boy!" Mr. Garnier ordered, pointing at Kazuya. "He's the one pulling all the strings!"

The young man spun. He put the knife in his mouth, and like an animal, went down on all fours and lunged at Kazuya. Kazuya was frozen for a second, but immediately leapt back the next moment.

The young man landed on the floor and spun around to face him. Kazuya kicked him in the face with all he had. He thought about the

contents of the martial arts book that his brother had sent him. The man held his bloody face, groaning, but then grabbed the knife in his mouth and charged at Kazuya.

The tip of the blade slipped past Kazuya's nose.

Kazuya, paying close attention on the knife coming at him from left to right, retreated. Then Inspector Blois, who had managed to escape from the female staff, tackled the young man from behind. He turned around and raised his knife at the inspector.

Kazuya pinned the young man from behind and strangled him with his right arm. Tighter and tighter...

The young man stopped moving, and Inspector Blois took his knife.

Suddenly, the other staff grabbed him. Inspector Blois let out a shout, then signaled Kazuya with his eyes to go.

Weaving past the officers and the salestaff, Kazuya left the first floor.

He climbed the stairs to the fifth floor and quietly made his way down the darkened hallway.

"First window... Second... Third..."

He kept counting as he went along. The numbers faintly glowed bluish-white in the darkness. It looked as if letters just floated in the air. Kazuya went on.

"Eleven... twelve..."

He stopped.

There was a wall between the twelfth and thirteenth windows. It was hard to grasp the space inside the store, cluttered with shelves of merchandise, small aisles, mannequins. Kazuya walked around the wall.

He could hear the footsteps of officers climbing up the stairs.

It's very thick for a wall...

The wall was crammed with expensive tapestries and Persian carpets.

There's definitely another room here. A room with a large window and a view of the Royal Square. It has to be behind this wall.

Kazuya flipped through the carpets and tapestries one by one.

"Kujou!"

The footsteps were coming closer. He could also hear Inspector Blois calling to him. Kazuya was between the wall and the carpets. Suddenly he was struck by an odd feeling. He thought that if he continued on, he would be sucked into a bizarre space inside the wall and dragged into another

world, and Inspector Blois would never find him. His head would remain, but his body would be gone.

There were killers lurking in the department store.

No, demons.

Crazy people who devoted themselves to devil worship.

The looking glass.

Kazuya found a door.

It was hidden by a piece of tapestry hanging on the wall. A small door. He thought it was locked, but when he gently grabbed the doorknob, it turned to the right.

Kazuya slowly opened the door and peeked inside.

The room was surprisingly crowded. It was much larger than it seemed from the outside, and it was darkly lit. Paintings hung on the walls, and glass cases containing glittering jewelry sat on what seemed like a small stage.

About ten children stood on the platform, their faces contorted with fear.

Around them stood a few salestaff from Jeantan, dressed in purple uniforms. The people crowding around them were customers. Dozens of people stood there in the darkness, staring coldly at the podium.

Kazuya's breath seized. Anastasia's voice rang in his ears.

"Demonic rituals! Demons! Demonic rituals!"

"Strange rituals. We are sacrifices. Demons surround us and recite weird incantations. They raise their hands like this."

Right now, in this very room, the demonic ritual that Anastasia described was about to begin.

One of the staff stepped forward and pushed a small child to their feet. A sacrifice. Then they smiled at the demons—the customers.

"The bidding starts at thirty thousand."

A customer quickly raised their hand. Just like what Anastasia said.

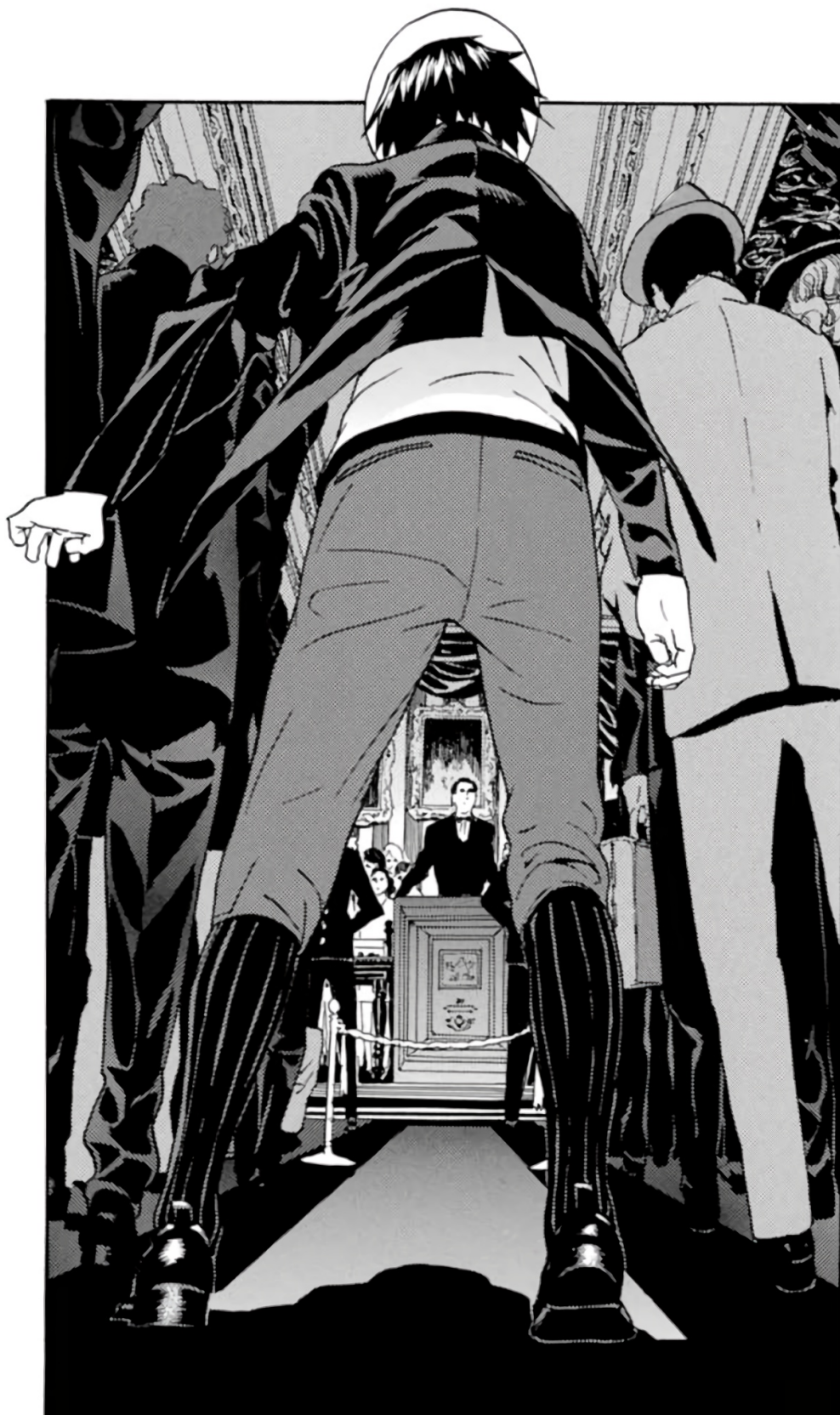
"Thirty-five thousand. Any others?"

Another customer raised their hand.

The staff nodded. "Thirty-seven thousand. Forty thousand. Forty-two thousand. Fifty thousand! I have fifty thousand. Do I hear a fifty-one? Fifty-one thousand. Fifty-two thousand!"

The weird incantation continued.

It's an auction! It's not some demonic ritual. It's an auction for the stolen artworks and the girls who disappeared. Anastasia doesn't understand French, so it sounded like some strange ritual to her.



Victorique's voice replayed in his mind.

"I believe something terrible is happening in the secret room."

"This case is just like an alexandrite."

"It changes color if you look at it from different angles."

"But it's the same stone. Do you understand?"

The long-established department store Jeantan was showing a different color. Kazuya recalled vividly the moment when Victorique's magic ring changed from red to green.

The darkness of the city, opening its mouth wide and swallowing people, which in turn was swallowed by horror stories, human desires given form.

Darkness.

"This case is an Alexandrite, Kujou."

"Kujou!" The inspector grabbed him by the shoulder.

Startled by the man's voice, the dark room became silent. The staff and customers turned around slowly at the same time. Their faces were devoid of emotions, expressionless as Noh masks.

Outside the window, the moon turned brighter. The wind had blown away the clouds that were covering it. Moonlight shone on all their faces.

Cold, expressionless faces that did not seem human. A crowd of ghosts wrapped in darkness.

The silence only lasted a moment. The staff screamed, and the customers scrambled in all directions, trying to escape.

"Round them all up!"

The police officers surrounded them.

One by one, the staff and customers were arrested, handcuffed, and taken away. There were glass cases in one corner of the room, filled with works of art. A necklace inlaid with a huge gem, a crown, a black-and-white pearl pendant—items Kazuya had seen in art textbooks at least once.

Kazuya reached for the glass case in the middle with shaky hands. Inside was a rare blue diamond, shaped like a large rose in bloom.

Sauville's national treasure—the Blue Rose.

Kazuya took the Blue Rose in his hand. It was much heavier than it looked. He raised his arm and slammed it down.

The Blue Rose fell and caused a scratch on the floor. There was no scratch on the glowing diamond. A police officer picked it up and confiscated it as evidence along with the other artifacts.

Inspector Blois nodded in satisfaction. "I have solved both the art theft and the missing persons cases. Gentlemen, go report to Mr. Signore." He then turned toward the door.

The door slowly opened, admitting Mr. Garnier. He looked at Inspector Blois with a soft smile of resignation. His lips curved cynically. "End of the line, I suppose."

"It would seem so," the inspector replied.

"Wealth and status built up over six years since the end of the Great War, gone in the blink of an eye."

"We'll hear what you have to say down at the station." Inspector Blois puffed out his chest and cuffed Mr. Garnier's hands. There was a loud clatter. "Take him away."

The officers nodded and left the room with Mr. Garnier.

The next morning.

Kazuya was summoned by Inspector Blois to the Sauville police department.

In the brick building across the Charles de Gilet train station, countless police officers milled about, apparently busy with last night's incident.

Mr. Garnier and his gang, who were arrested last night, were being questioned by the police.

Mr. Garnier was surprisingly quick to confess to his crimes. He was part of the gang that raided the Sauville royal treasury during the Great War, and with the money he made from the looting, he bought the long-established department store Jeantan. The store became the base of his operations, and Mr. Garnier's business grew rapidly in just six years after the end of the war.

Meanwhile, the rescued kids were confined to the hospital. They would be asked questions once they had recovered.

Kazuya met the Russian girl, Anastasia, in a room at the station. She seemed to be in remarkably good health, and when she noticed Kazuya, she smiled.

"Thank you," she said. "When you opened the crate and I saw your face, you seemed kind-hearted. I thought you might be able to help me, so I asked for help. Thank you so much." The terrified look she had on her face was gone, replaced with the carefree smile typical of a girl her age.

Kazuya was relieved. Apparently, Anastasia had contacted her relatives in the suburbs of Saubreme, and they were taking her in.

"I'll write you," she said with a smile, and Kazuya left the room.

The old lady in front of Jeantan was also taken into custody because of her connection to the case. The police asked her to testify about her missing daughter and said they would search for her daughter along with the other missing people.

The old woman was sitting meekly on a chair. She wasn't wearing her coat this time, so Kazuya could finally see what was swaying eerily inside her clothes. A girly hat with a ribbon, a rolled-up dress, and a bag, all tied together with a string, hanging from her neck. The officers said that they probably belonged to her missing daughter. That was what was actually hidden inside her ragged clothes, and what inspired the horror story.

Inspector Blois disappeared in a hurry when he was told by an officer that the Police Commissioner Mr. Signore and other bigshots wanted a report. Kazuya was sitting in the small room with nothing to do, when he noticed an officer standing in the hallway.

"Can I borrow your phone?" he asked.

"Sure, but who are you calling?"

"Um, a friend of mine."

The officer nodded and led Kazuya to the room with a phone.

Kazuya thanked him, picked up the receiver, and asked the operator to connect him to St. Marguerite Academy. He explained the situation to Ms. Cecile and asked her to reroute the call to Victorique's dorm.

Victorique seemed to have recovered from her cold overnight, but she was in a terrible mood. Or maybe she was just skittish because of her cold yesterday, and now she had reverted back to her usual self.

"I'm not talking to you!" she snapped.

"Why not? Anyway, forget that. Listen."

"Forget?!"

Kazuya, perhaps because they were talking over the phone, was speaking with the same bold attitude as yesterday. A new discovery—Victorique de Blois was not as scary over the phone.

"You had a fever yesterday, didn't you? If you're feeling a little better now, I need to know something."

"You want me to explain the mystery to you?"

“Yeah...” Kazuya nodded.

“No.”

“No?! Why not?”

“I hate boredom, you see,” she said. “So when I find chaos, I gather up the fragments and reconstruct them, and that way, for a brief moment, I am free from boredom. It’s comforting to the soul. But only for a short while.”

“And...?”

“However, whether or not I will further verbalize what I have reconstructed for a helpless simpleton like you depends largely on my mood. What I’m saying is, I’m not in the mood for it right now. Bye.”

“No!”

“No?!” Victorique sounded shocked.

After a brief back-and-forth, Victorique sighed in resignation. **“Fine,”** she said, and reluctantly started explaining.

“I was suffering from fever and dying of boredom,” Victorique said.

“I think you got it switched. Don’t you mean you were dying from the fever?”

“Silence. So you see, I was reading a young priest’s journal about an incident that took place in a medieval temple.”

Kazuya frowned. He had no idea what she was talking about, but he was afraid that Victorique would get mad, so he kept quiet.

“A bishop from Saubreme was scheduled to arrive one night. Just as the villagers were thinking of showing their piety, two incidents occurred. One was the theft of silverware from a wealthy merchant’s house. The other was the theft of a pig from a farmhouse on the outskirts of the village. The villagers were outraged and quickly captured those who they believed were responsible for each incident before the bishop arrived. The men accused of stealing the silverware were drifters. A poor farm boy was accused of stealing the pig. Each of them claimed they were innocent, but the angry villagers refused to listen. Now, just as they were about to be tried for their supposed crimes, the bishop arrived.”

“Okay...”

“The bishop learned about the incidents. He told the villagers to forgive them. He also muttered cryptic words to the priests: ‘You are

also forgiven.’ The written account ends there. The monks who stole the silverware and the pig—”

“Wait, the monks stole the silverware and the pig? Why?”

“Were you even listening?” Victorique hissed. **“I just told you.”**

“But you didn’t though.”

“Is that so? Then take a guess.”

“I can’t!” Kazuya snapped.

Victorique was silent for a moment, flabbergasted. Then, with a sigh, she said, **“The monks were the culprits. The villagers saw the incidents as two unrelated cases, found the likely culprits, and tried to forcefully bring them to justice. But think about it. Two incidents on the same night. In a village where such things rarely happen. Wouldn’t it be safer to assume that the two incidents were caused by the same culprit with the same purpose? In other words, there were people who needed silverware and a pig that night. They were the culprits.”**

“Why would they need silverware and a pig?”

“To serve the bishop, what else?”

“Oh!”

“Their temple was poor. But they didn’t want the bishop to know that. Perhaps they feared that the temple itself would be closed. The monks could have begged the villagers and asked them to lend them silverware and give them meat. But they couldn’t do that, and had to watch as innocent people were arrested for their crimes. The young monk who wrote the journal was not a part of it, though, and was absolutely clueless until the end. According to him, prayers filled the temple. He assumed it was because of the incidents. And there was also a horrible smell of raw blood. It should be obvious if you think about it for a bit. It was not the smell of sin. Someone was chopping a pig.”

“I see...”

“Let’s forget about the dumb young monk. The bishop, who arrived late, immediately realized what was going on. He helped the arrested people and forgave the monks. The young monk didn’t seem to see the connection, but when the bishop returned to the capital, he reviewed the temple’s operating expenses. Do you get it now?”

She was about to hang up the phone, when Kazuya said, **“Get what now?”**

A puzzled silence followed on the other end of the receiver.

“It’s the same with this case,” Victorique continued with hesitation.

“Two different things were stolen, but the culprit and the purpose were the same. It was the temple that took the silverware and the pig. It was Jeantan who took the artifacts and the missing people. Your account of what happened contained the fragments of chaos that needed to be reconstructed. For example, the stolen goods brought from the colonies and the treasures of the Romanov dynasty.”

“Hmm...?”

“Anastasia said that after the demonic ritual, a girl disappeared. She was auctioned. That same night, she came back cold, bandaged in a coffin. Anastasia thought that it was the same girl’s dead body, but it wasn’t.”

“What was it?”

“Stolen goods brought in from the colonies. The kind of thing that collectors fight to get their hands on. It was probably a mummy from colonial Egypt.”

Kazuya gasped.

Anastasia’s words came to his mind.

“Never came back until later that night... in a coffin.”

“Her whole body was covered in bandages. I called her name, but she wouldn’t answer.”

“I touched her, and she felt cold. She was already dead.”

“Ah, I get it. Anastasia mistook the mummy for the girl.”

“Yes, she did,” Victorique said. **“There were also treasures of the Romanov dynasty in that room, which were brought to Europe just before the Russian Revolution and supposedly disappeared.”**

“Really?”

“Do you remember what Anastasia said about the two-headed eagle?”

“Yeah...”

“The two-headed eagle is the emblem of the Romanov family.”

“Oh, I see...”

“The Romanov family’s treasures were probably among the artifacts in the secret room. Do you understand, Kujou?”

Kazuya nodded. “Y-Yeah...”

“Do you understand, Kujou, the pathetic halfwit who doesn’t understand anything unless I verbalize it for him?”

“Say that again, and I’ll really—”

Before he could say any more, the door opened, and Inspector Blois entered.

“Later, Victorique,” Kazuya said. Before he could hang up the phone, he realized that Victorique already ended the call before him. He stared at the receiver for a moment, his face a mixture of emptiness and fury.

“Victorique, you little...” he mumbled with a sigh, then gently put down the phone.

Police Commissioner Mr. Signore entered the room along with Inspector Blois.

“Grevil, the king is very pleased with your finding the Blue Rose,” Mr. Signore said. He shrugged, and his voice took on a bemused tone. “But he says it’s a bit ironic that Marquis de Blois’ eldest son should find the Blue Rose for the king.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes. The king has not forgotten the incident with the alchemist Leviathan, who once tried to seize the kingdom, and the subsequent plotting of the Marquis during the Great War.”

“That’s all in the past,” Inspector Blois said.

Mr. Signoret smiled thinly in silent rebuttal. Then he shrugged again. “Come to my office later. I’m not there, but there’s someone who wants to see you.” He looked at Kazuya. “Oh, you come too, young man.” He then left in a hurry.

Inspector Blois and Kazuya headed to Mr. Signore’s reception office located on the fourth floor.

Kazuya was calm, but Inspector Blois was coughing repeatedly. He tugged at his suit, fixed his hair, and then sighed. Kazuya glanced at him uncomfortably.

They reached the fourth floor, and the elevator’s steel cage rattled open. Inspector Blois stepped out quickly, but suddenly tripped over nothing. In his panic, he grabbed Kazuya’s clothes, bringing him down with him, and the two of them tumbled down the hallway.

“Ouch!”

“S-Sorry...”

Inspector Blois rushed to his feet and fixed his hair.

What is wrong with him?

Watching the inspector suspiciously, Kazuya followed behind.

When he opened the door to the reception office, the sound of laughter rolled out. A blue-eyed, good-looking boy of about ten years was rolling with laughter. The person making him laugh was a lady standing across from him. Wearing an elegant brown dress with few ornaments, she appeared to be in her early twenties. Her straight brown hair didn't receive that much care, it seemed; it was dry and lacked the shine.

“Is it funny? Is it funny?”

“Wahahaha!”

The boy laughed again. Kazuya glanced at the lady's face, and burst out laughing.

The lady was squishing her face with her hands. Every time she moved her hands, her face would magically change, which was even funnier than the previous one. Kazuya couldn't help but laugh as he glanced at Inspector Blois.

Huh?

Inspector Blois had a deep frown on his face. He cast the lady a glance and sighed.

The lady seemed to be the type to get carried away; when she saw that her clown act was well-received by Kazuya, she made even more ridiculous faces. But when she noticed Inspector Blois' displeasure, she pulled her hands away from her face.

She was surprisingly quite pretty, possessing the beauty typical of the nobility. If she put more effort into buying dresses and fixing her hair than making funny faces, she'd be captivating.

Who's this lady? Kazuya wondered. I'm pretty sure this is Mr. Signore's reception office, but the only people here are this weird lady and the boy.

The blue-eyed boy wiped the tears in his eyes with the back of his hand. “Sup!” he greeted.

“Huh?” Kazuya stared at the boy's face.

Blue eyes and milky skin. He seemed quite the clever boy. He only reached Kazuya's chest in terms of height, so he was a little shorter than Victorique. Kazuya didn't think he knew a boy like him.

“You have the memory of a goldfish or something, you dumb Chinese?”

Kazuya cocked his head. “Oh!”

“Finally remembered, huh?”

“Luigi?!”

It was Luigi, the street urchin with the sharp memory. He rubbed the bridge of his nose. “I’m going to school,” he said proudly. “Mrs. Signore here does volunteer work. She’s helping send smart kids to school. I’m going to boarding school.”

Luigi told him the name of a school by the sea. He kept proudly repeating that he was going to school.

Kazuya rubbed Luigi’s head, then turned to the lady—Mrs. Signore.

Mrs. Signore took on a serious look and nodded. “I heard about the incident from my husband last night,” she said. “I told him that I would do what I could for those poor girls and then I would take care of this child who was instrumental in solving the case.”

“I see.”

Kazuya studied Mrs. Signore’s face. She had that dignified demeanor befitting of the wife of the Police Commissioner, but for some reason, Kazuya thought that she looked like a precocious young girl trying her best to pretend to be an adult. Unable to contain himself, Kazuya chuckled.

“Huh? Why are you laughing?” She turned to the inspector. “Tell me, Grevil!”

“I’m sorry,” Kazuya said. “I just remembered the face you were making.”

“I-It’s my special skill since I was young. Right, Grevil?”

Kazuya’s eyes darted between Mrs. Signore and Inspector Blois. The inspector was scowling at the floor.

Mrs. Signore took out a handkerchief and wiped the tears from the corners of her eyes. “It’s been a long time, Grevil. I see you’re still sporting the same weird hairdo.”

“Your face is much weirder, Jacqueline.”

Kazuya stopped laughing. *Jacqueline*? He glanced at them both again.

Jacqueline was the name that Inspector Blois had blurted out at the Charles de Gilet station yesterday. The inspector looked, as he recalled, a little agitated and sad at the same time, and when he realized that he had mistaken the lady for someone else, he was clearly dejected.

“Um, so your name is Jacqueline?” Kazuya asked.

“Yup. Why?”

“What’s your relationship with the inspector?”

“We’re childhood friends. He didn’t always have this hairdo. He was fashionable and handsome, and every girl wanted him. And now he looks like this. What happened?”

“A lot,” Inspector Blois said curtly. “A lot has happened.” His face turned grimmer.

“So right now...”

“My husband has been promoted to Police Commissioner, and as his wife, I do a lot of volunteer work, such as helping child victims of crimes. I was surprised to learn yesterday that Grevil was in Saubreme for work. Since when were you interested in police work? Doesn’t really suit you, does it?”

Inspector Blois was silent, then said in a low voice, “Is that why you called us here? To give us an update on this boy?”

“Yes. I thought you might be a little worried. And I also wanted to see you, Grevil.”

“Well, if that’s all...” Inspector Blois turned and headed for the door. Kazuya quickly went after him.

Mrs. Signore and Luigi watched them go with smiles.

“Ah, yes! Grevil.”

“What is it?”

“I heard you played a huge part in this case. Congratulations. That’s amazing. I was bragging about you to others, telling them we’re childhood friends. So don’t tell me we’re not friends anymore. Although we’ve grown apart since I got married.”

“...”

The inspector opened the door and stepped out into the hallway. Before he left, he peered back into the room and mumbled, “It was nice seeing you, Jacqueline.”

“Same here. See you later.”

“Yeah...”

Inspector Blois closed the door.

The inspector walked down the hallway with Kazuya by his side. He had a strange look on his face—a mix of frustration and sadness, like a child who had his toy taken away from him.

Kazuya studied his expression.

The inspector ignored him for a while, until eventually he couldn't take it anymore.

“Stop staring at me with your dumb face!”

“What?”

“Eyes front and walk straight! Right. Left. Right. Left!”

“I-I'm sorry...?”

Kazuya wasn't sure why he was apologizing, but the inspector's menacing look gave him no choice but to quietly obey.

Bedroom 6

Light from the sultry sun streamed in through the French windows along with a cool breeze. The bobbin lace curtains, with its floral pattern, billowed.

Victorique, in her nightgown, was perched in the middle of the canopied bed. Her eyes were still a little hot and moist, and she was staring blankly at the ceiling.

“Victorique?” The door opened, and Ms. Cecile entered uneasily.

Victorique frowned. “What is it?”

“Phone call for you.”

“Again?! That weirdo.”

Ms. Cecile chuckled. “He said he’s catching a train back here soon. But there’s something that’s been bothering him, so he called.”

“Why not ask once he’s back? Oddball.” Victorique snorted, then got up reluctantly.

“Hello, Victorique? Oh, good. I’m glad you picked up. Something’s been bugging me about your brother.”

“Could you stop asking me about Grevil?”

“Why?”

“I don’t really like to admit that we’re blood-related.” She pulled a small chair and sat down. “So what’s this about Grevil?”

“The inspector was acting weird the whole time.”

“He *always* acts weird.”

“Good one.” Kazuya hesitated for a moment before asking. **“We met Jacqueline, the police commissioner’s wife. Who on earth is she?”**

Victorique frowned and let out an annoyed groan. “She’s Grevil’s childhood friend, and the love of his life. She doesn’t seem to feel the same way, though. Did you call me just for that?”

Kazuya let out a surprised grunt. **“Love of his life?! Really?”**

“Yeah. And by the way.”

“What?”

“She’s the reason for Grevil’s hairstyle.”

He grunted again. **“Right. He mentioned something about his hairdo, yes. But wait, why?!”**

“Hmm...”

“And she commented on his hairdo, looking real serious.”

“Why, of course. She doesn’t know that it’s her fault.” Victorique chuckled.

A cruel, bone-chilling expression crossed her pale face, lingering for a while before vanishing. Her usual expression returned, and she sighed.

“That was five years ago,” she began. “I was still locked in the Marquis’ tower. No one came to see me except when they brought me books, dresses, and food. Except Grevil. For some reason, he climbed up the tower every night and silently observed from a distance, as though he thought I would bite. It was really creepy. I took advantage of the fact that he believed in the Gray Wolf lore to scare him. I told him that I had demonic powers and knew what he was doing despite not seeing him. Of course, in reality, I was only using the Wellspring of Wisdom to reconstruct the chaos from him. But he had no way of knowing that. Eventually he avoided the tower in fear of me.”

“Ahuh...”

“But about six months later, he suddenly came back. He told me that his childhood friend, a girl named Jacqueline, was to be married, but that just before the wedding, she was accused of a horrible murder. Her fiancé, a young man named Signore, was a police officer, but he couldn’t exonerate her. Grevil has always had a crush on Jacqueline. While wondering how to help her, he thought about me, his terrifying sister, a Gray Wolf.”

“So you helped Jacqueline, right? ‘Cause I saw her, and she was doing great.”

Victorique shrugged. “Of course I did.”

“So in the process, Inspector Blois became pointy-headed. How did that happen?”

“I told him to do it.”

“Hmm...?”

Victorique snickered as memories came back. “A demonic demand, so to speak. The Blois family knows that, and that’s why they don’t ask for my

help unless they're in dire straits."

"I see. So you're really the reason behind that awful hairdo."

"I thought it would be painful for a fop."

Kazuya was silent for a moment. **"You can be so immature sometimes."**

It was Victorique's turn to be quiet this time. Then in a soft voice, she said, "Grevil didn't refuse. With a straight face and a pointy head, he asked that I save Jacqueline's life. He told me the details of the case and I told him who the real culprit was. Grevil gave an anonymous tip, and the real culprit was arrested. Jacqueline's name was cleared."

"Anonymous?! You mean *the* Inspector Blois? Impossible!"

"Is it?"

"Yeah! He always takes credit for the cases you solve. There's no way." Kazuya hesitated a bit before continuing. **"Is Inspector Blois so eager to make a name for himself in the force because of Mr. Signore?"**

"Who knows?" Victorique shrugged. "Anyway, five years later, and Grevil still has that hairstyle. He's being stubborn."

"Is that why you two don't get along?"

"No idea. Well, I suppose that's part of it." Victorique smiled thinly. "Kujou, don't you have a train to catch?"

"Yeah. Oh, shoot. I lost track of time. Inspector Blois is supposed to be stuck in Saubreme for a while, but I'm a student, so they let me go early. I'll be back at the academy by evening. I got you a souvenir by the way."

Victorique let out a faint groan. Kujou's weird souvenirs flashed in her mind.

"I've got to go. See you later, Victorique."

The call ended.

Victorique sighed and put down the receiver.

For a while, Victorique didn't get up. She just stayed in her small chair, thinking about something. Despite all the frills and ribbons, she was still quite small.

She shuddered.

Victorique recalled the conversation she had had with her brother Grevil when she was still locked in the tower.

She did not remember much about that time. It had been buried in the recesses of her memory while she read countless books, satiating her Wellspring of Wisdom. But today, for some reason, she remembered it well.

Victorique, the little Gray Wolf that everyone, family and servants alike, feared. They feared the child who knew everything, even things she had not witnessed herself. Indeed, the Blois family had many secrets.

Family secrets were no different. Political secrets—the occult, the Great War, the missing Cordelia, the scandal surrounding the Leviathan.

The Marquis finally locked the little Gray Wolf up in his tower. Grevil, who later returned home from boarding school and learned that he had a sister, also feared and hated her.

But back then, Grevil mocked Victorique. He was the only one ever to call her a fool.

“You’re an ignorant princess locked in a tower,” he had growled. He had already sported the pointy hair back then, so whatever he said really should have had no effect. ***“If you wanted to throw me into the pits of despair, you should have asked me not to love Jacqueline anymore.”*** He laughed. ***“Didn’t think of that, did you?”***

Victorique did not answer. She was much smaller then and much less human than she was now. She had never had a normal conversation with anyone. All she did was verbalize chaos in her husky voice and scare those around her.

“This hairstyle is no big deal. I saved Jacqueline, so that’s all that matters. You have no power to put anyone in despair. Because the little Gray Wolf has never loved anyone.”

Victorique swayed in her chair as she cast her mind back to that time. The little Gray Wolf did not understand the meaning of Grevil’s words back then.

Will I understand now?

For some reason, the image of her odd oriental friend came to mind. He should be on the train now, on the way back to the academy.

Victorique’s few memories of adventures in the outside world, out of the tower and the academy, always had Kazuya Kujou in them. He wasn’t as smart as Victorique, but he was wise enough, and above all, kind-hearted. He was always there to help Victorique. She also saved him from falling off a cliff.

Victorique softly opened her hand.

The wound on her small palms from her adventure a few weeks ago had not yet healed. She found the wounds curious. Why did she reach out to grab him back then? Why did she not want to lose him? And why did she not want Kujou Kazuya to see the wounds after that?

What did the hands grasped for the lonely Victorique?

“The little Gray Wolf has never loved anyone!”

Victorique tried desperately to block her brother’s voice out of her mind.

That’s not true...

She rocked in her chair. Faint sobs mixed in with the chair’s squeaking.

“That’s not true,” she murmured in her low, husky voice.

Rocking in her chair, she sobbed softly.

Epilogue: Maze

That afternoon.

After undergoing questioning and giving his testimony at the Sauville police headquarters, Kazuya left his partner, Inspector Grevil de Blois, in Saubreme, and took the train alone back to St. Marguerite Academy.

Upon disembarking at the small station, he sighed, straightened his back, looked serious, and started walking.

A shaggy horse passed by, pulling a cart.

As usual, the village was filled with a laid-back atmosphere. Girls chatted and laughed as they walked along. Crimson geraniums in bloom hung from wooden frames, swaying in the dry, early-summer breeze.

Kazuya's face gradually softened, and a smile appeared on his face. On arrival at St. Marguerite Academy, he passed through the main gate, relieved. Stepping onto the gravel path, he strolled through the gardens, making his way to the office in a corner of the school building.

"Ms. Cecile..." he called.

Ms. Cecile lifted her head from her desk. When she saw Kazuya standing there, she rose to her feet and approached him.

"Kujou! The police called. They said there was trouble."

"Yes, but I'm fine now. I'm sorry for making you worry. So, uhh..." He began fidgeting.

Ms. Cecile eyed him curiously. "What's wrong?"

"I was so busy with the case that I couldn't buy a Blue Rose paperweight."

"Oh, it's totally fine!" she exclaimed, fixing her round glasses. "You don't have to worry about that. Oh, by the way, Victorique's fever has gone down a lot." She smiled.

"That's good to hear."

"You can go see her if you want. She was complaining about being bored."

Kazuya's face instantly turned dark. "I don't know... Nothing good happens when she's bored. If only I could see her when she's *not* bored, but unfortunately, that's never the case."

Ms. Cecile shot him a glare and pushed him out of the office.

"Wh-What are you doing?"

"Just go see her, okay?"

"O-Okay..."

Confused, Kazuya went out the hallway. He glanced down at what he was holding. Ms. Cecile looked at it too.

It was a small package with a red ribbon. Ms. Cecile nodded, as though she knew what it was.

Kazuya bowed. "I'll be going, then," he said, then started down the hallway.

Ms. Cecile fixed her glasses again. "Oh, Kujou..."

She returned to the office and took out Kazuya's records from among the student files, sent from an island country in the Far East.

The documents detailed his grades and conduct. It was accompanied by a family photo of him in formal attire.

Ms. Cecile stared at the picture. A strict-looking father and two older brothers. Kazuya was flanked by two slim-figured women. His mother and older sister, most likely. His older sister, who seemed to be not much older than Kazuya, was rubbing her cheek against him, while Kazuya was looking down in embarrassment. She was beautiful, with jet-black eyes and glossy hair.

"He gets good grades, is industrious, and overall a nice, straight-laced boy... but he can be dense sometimes." Ms. Cecile sighed. She watched the trees swaying in the breeze outside. "I think bored means she's lonely."

Kazuya left the school building and strolled along the gravel path, when he heard someone call his name.

"Kujou!"

He stopped and saw Avril waving at him from the vast green lawn. She was sitting cross-legged, the pleated skirt of her uniform billowed out like an open umbrella.

"Welcome back!" she greeted with a bright smile. "How was Saubreme?"

“It was a disaster.”

Kazuya walked toward the grass, scratching his head. Avril, noticing his gloom, got up and scuttled toward him, looking worried. She left the magazines and notebooks scattered all over the lawn.

“What do you mean disaster? Did something happen?”

“Uh, well... Oh, by the way.” Kazuya remembered something. “I need to apologize. Things happened while I was in Saubreme, and I couldn’t buy what you asked for.”

“Did I ask you to buy me something?” she asked curiously.

“You did! You asked me to buy you a Blue Rose paperweight.”

“Ah, right!” Avril nodded. “It’s fine. Don’t worry about it.”

“Really? That’s good to hear.” Kazuya stroked his chest in relief.

If it had been Victorique, not Ms. Cecile or Avril, he would’ve dashed out of the academy at full speed. Victorique would not have listened to any excuses, and proceed to torment him with joy.

“You’re a nice girl, all right.”

Avril’s face turned red, and she shrank back in embarrassment. “Where’d that come from?!”

“You don’t get mad, that’s why.”

“I do. I just won’t get mad at you for that. Hmm?” She suddenly found her gaze drawn to something. Her expression changed little by little.

Kazuya, on the other hand, was completely unaware. Avril was staring at a wrapping paper with a red ribbon that Kazuya was holding under his arm.

Avril’s face gradually, slowly, puffed up.



“Wh-What’s wrong?” Kazuya asked.

“Now I’m mad!”

“Why?! You literally just said you won’t get mad!”

Avril groaned, then snatched the package from Kazuya’s hand and started running across the lawn. Kazuya watched her go, mouth agape. After running for about ten meters, she turned around and put the package on her head, laughing boisterously.

“Bwahahahahaha!”

“What are you doing?”

“Wahahaha!”

Then her spirits dampened, and she sighed. “I’m sorry,” she said, running back. She handed the package back to Kazuya. “It’s really fine. Please forget what you just saw.” There were tears in the corner of her eyes.

Kazuya remembered how she had once put a golden skull on her head. *She’s nice and cheerful, but she sure loves putting weird things on her head.*

Avril walked back to her spot, dejected. Then she stopped and looked at Kazuya. “Kujou...”

“Hmm?”

“I just wanna ask something.”

“What is it?”

“What kind of girl is Victorique?”

“Victorique?” Kazuya stared at Avril, confused. He found the question odd, but Avril looked serious. And sad.

Kazuya stayed quiet for a while, not sure how to answer her question.

What should I say? Kazuya mulled it over.

“She’s a good girl...? No, I guess not. But she’s not bad either.”

Then he remembered Victorique’s own words from the other day. It described her perfectly.

“She’s demonic.”

“Demonic?” Avril cocked her head curiously.

A dry, early-summer breeze whistled past between them.

After Kazuya bid her goodbye, Avril returned to her spot on the grass, still curious about what he meant.

“Demonic?” She sat down. “How could he call a girl demonic? Does that mean they’re good friends? Hngh, I have no idea.”

She crossed her legs and continued pondering the matter with a serious face.

Kazuya stood in the same spot as the other morning, staring wearily at the labyrinth of flowerbeds.

Square hedges as tall as a man, and colorful flowers in full bloom. A quick peek through the entrance revealed a twisted and intricate maze. Kazuya sighed. It looked like he would never come back out once he stepped in.

“What’s up, kid?” A sudden thick voice came from below.

Kazuya jumped, took a few steps back, and looked at his feet. A familiar face peeked out from under the hedge. Tanned and leathery skin, and a white beard. It was the same old gardener who trimmed the hedge that separated the campus from the outside.

Kazuya told him that he was here to see his friend.

“A friend? Who?” the gardener asked, surprised. “Does someone live here?” He scratched his cheek.

The man stood up. Kazuya’s head only reached his shoulders.

The gardener pointed to the maze. “I don’t know how to get past the maze, but I *do* know how to get to the middle.”

“Really?”

“Listen closely. You have to go along the wall. It’s a long way around, but just pick a side and follow it. The walls are all connected, so you should end up in the middle of the maze at some point.”

“I see.”

Kazuya thanked him, and after mustering up some courage, stepped into the maze.

Meanwhile, Victorique was rocking in her chair by the window, despondent, like a princess locked away in some tower. Dressed in a wide-sleeved white dress with organdy ribbons and frills, she was wearily—but quickly—leafing through a difficult-looking book.

On her cherry lips was not an ivory pipe, but a thin white stick. A small candy bar. Candies in the shapes of teddy bears, castles, and bunnies lay scattered on the table beside her.

Victorique’s pudgy cheek puffed up and squirmed with each lick. Her movements were automatic; she had already forgotten about the candy. Her

mind was focused solely on the complicated book.

Her fever had gone down considerably, and she appeared well. Above all, the timid and depressed look she had when suffering from the cold was gone. She was calm and expressionless, and the air around her was as ruthless as ever.

She sensed someone approaching from beyond the bizarre and impenetrable labyrinth of flowerbeds that surrounded the small house. Victorique's little ears twitched like a kitten's when it heard its owner return. But she did not look up. Apart from the sudden decrease in the speed at which she leafed through the book, there was no change in her still figure.

A small oriental boy emerged from the maze. He seemed to have just returned to the academy and was not wearing a uniform. His heavy breathing said he had a hard time getting through the maze. When he noticed Victorique sitting by the window, he stopped and stared at her.

She was holding it in. She continued pretending that she didn't notice him, determined not to look happy.

She noticed that the boy—Kazuya—was smiling. She was still expressionless.

Kazuya walked toward her. Victorique looked up as if she had only just noticed the sound of his footsteps.

"Oh, it's you," she said in her husky voice, her expression still the same.

"Yup, it's me. I'm back."

Victorique scoffed and looked away.

"You bland, foolish rascal suffering from telephonitis," she said. "How many times do you have to call me? Each time I had to crawl out of my bedroom to the room with the phone. And while I was at it, I got shot with an injection."

Kazuya stood outside the window, resting his elbows on the windowsill and looking at Victorique. *What is she mad about?* he wondered. While regarding her face curiously, he noticed the candy bars scattered on the table.

"Wow! Those are some pretty-looking candies." He grabbed a bunny-shaped one, peeled off the orange wrapper, and tossed it into his mouth.

Victorique gasped.

“Wh-What is it?” Kazuya asked.

“My bunny candy! I was saving that one for last!”

“What? Why does it matter in which order you eat it? Besides, all candies taste the same.”

“...We’re done.”

“I remember you crying, saying you didn’t want that.”

Victorique lifted the thick book and slammed the hinge on Kazuya’s head. He fell silent, tears in his eyes.

Twilight was approaching, and the radiant evening sunlight of early summer was falling on the flowers, their petals glistening as though wet.

A light-blue kimono hung like a curtain on the window sill, swaying in the breeze. Victorique’s Wellspring of Wisdom had repurposed the kimono, a gift from Kazuya’s sister, as a curtain.

The wind blew again.

Kazuya wondered if he should talk about Brian Roscoe, the man he saw in front of the theater in Saubreme, but ultimately decided that he was probably just someone with the same name. For a while, they remained silent.

“Anyway, the fact that you’re able to bully me again means you’re feeling much better,” Kazuya said. “That’s good to know.”

Victorique shot him a glare. “What are you talking about?”

“Hmm?”

“You feel happy when you’re tormented? What a weirdo.”

“I’m *not* happy about it, of course! I’m seething. But that’s just what you always do. It was weird hearing you all weak and feeble like a different person. What I’m saying is... uhh... I was worried.”

“You were rather bossy for someone worried. Calling me mean and whatnot.”

“I-I did? Sorry. Did I offend you?”

“Of course.” Victorique nodded and turned away. She focused her attention back on the book.

The bright orange sun was shining on the flowerbeds. It dyed Kazuya’s face a faint red as he stared at Victorique from outside the window.

Kazuya scratched his head. Victorique still seemed mad about something. He presented the package he was holding to her.

“Victorique? Hello?”

“...What is it?”

“A souvenir.”

Victorique groaned and shot Kazuya a suspicious look. “So you bought one,” she mumbled. She stared at it warily for a moment. “I’m assuming it’s another weird item.”

“No!” he denied. “It’s, uhh... actually good.”

Victorique reached for it gingerly. Still feeling annoyed, she tore the wrapper wildly.

A small jade shoe appeared. A single, small shoe. It was a shoe-shaped pipe rest. Victorique lifted it gently with both hands. It stood out magically against the twilight. It looked more beautiful now in the hands of the little girl in this small house surrounded by flowerbeds than when Kazuya saw it in the window of the pipe shop in Saubreme. An item that seemed out of some fantasy world. Feeling proud, Kazuya looked at Victorique’s face, but her eyes were still narrowed in displeasure.

Victorique snorted.

Kazuya was shocked. “You don’t want it?”

“...I do!”

Victorique clutched the pipe rest dearly with both hands, as if she didn’t want it taken away. Her eyes were wide open like a child in wonder.

Kazuya stared at her for a moment, then giggled. “So you like it?”

A faint “hmm” of affirmation came from Victorique. Relieved, Kazuya watched her fiddle with the pipe rest with great interest.

“That’s good.”

Victorique cast a glance at Kazuya’s face, then returned her gaze to the pipe rest again, fiddling with it eagerly.

Kazuya noticed the alexandrite ring on her finger, a ring that changed color depending on the light source. “I guess there are two sides to things sometimes.”

“Where’d this come from?” Victorique gave him a weird look.

“Just a few days ago, I was saying how everything in the world can be explained with logic. But this case was very strange.”

“Hmm?”

“Up until now, I’ve only seen what I can see with my own two eyes, but maybe there’s more to things. Like the state of the world. I’ve started to see things in Sauville that I couldn’t back in my country. I thought that if the

world was more than just what was visible to the eye, I could have a little more courage, and maybe I could become stronger than I am now. I can't really put it into words well, but that's what I think."

"Unfortunately, you're just a plain, ordinary human being."

"Tsk. Well, I guess that's true."

Kazuya regarded Victorique's face, tinged with melancholy, nobility, and decadence.

Victorique, who had instantly reconstructed the fragments of chaos just by hearing about the incident over the phone. In her head was a huge and bizarre space she referred to as the Wellspring of Wisdom.

Kazuya felt as if he too was entering this labyrinth. It was both terrifying and irresistible.

He was becoming a part of the bizarre maze that made up Victorique.

"I don't know why," Kazuya said, "but while I was in Saubreme, I found myself thinking about you. Maybe it was because I heard you caught a cold. I doubt you even thought of me at all."

"Of course not. I never wondered when you were coming back or how you would listen to what I had to say," Victorique said doggedly. There was a slight hint of panic on her face. "Never."

Kazuya had no idea why she was flustered. "Is that so?"

"Yes!"

"Yeah, yeah, I get it. You don't have to be so defensive." Kazuya fell silent.

The only sound in the small house was the flipping of the pages.

"So, I was thinking, Victorique," Kazuya said. "How mysterious you really are. To me, you are the strangest of all mysteries."

Victorique slowly lifted her head. She looked a little puzzled. Her green eyes blinked repeatedly as she stared at Kazuya.



“Is that so?” she said at last.

Kazuya nodded. “Yup. I can’t solve mysteries as rapidly as you, but someday I’ll solve the mystery surrounding you. I swear it.”

“Knock yourself out.” Victorique scoffed and looked away. Her cheeks were a little red, but Kazuya thought it was just his imagination.

Kazuya, wondering if he should ask her how to get to the middle of the flowerbed maze, watched the face of his little mysterious friend with a smile.

An early-summer breeze blew, tousling their black and golden hairs.

Gosick - Volume 03

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